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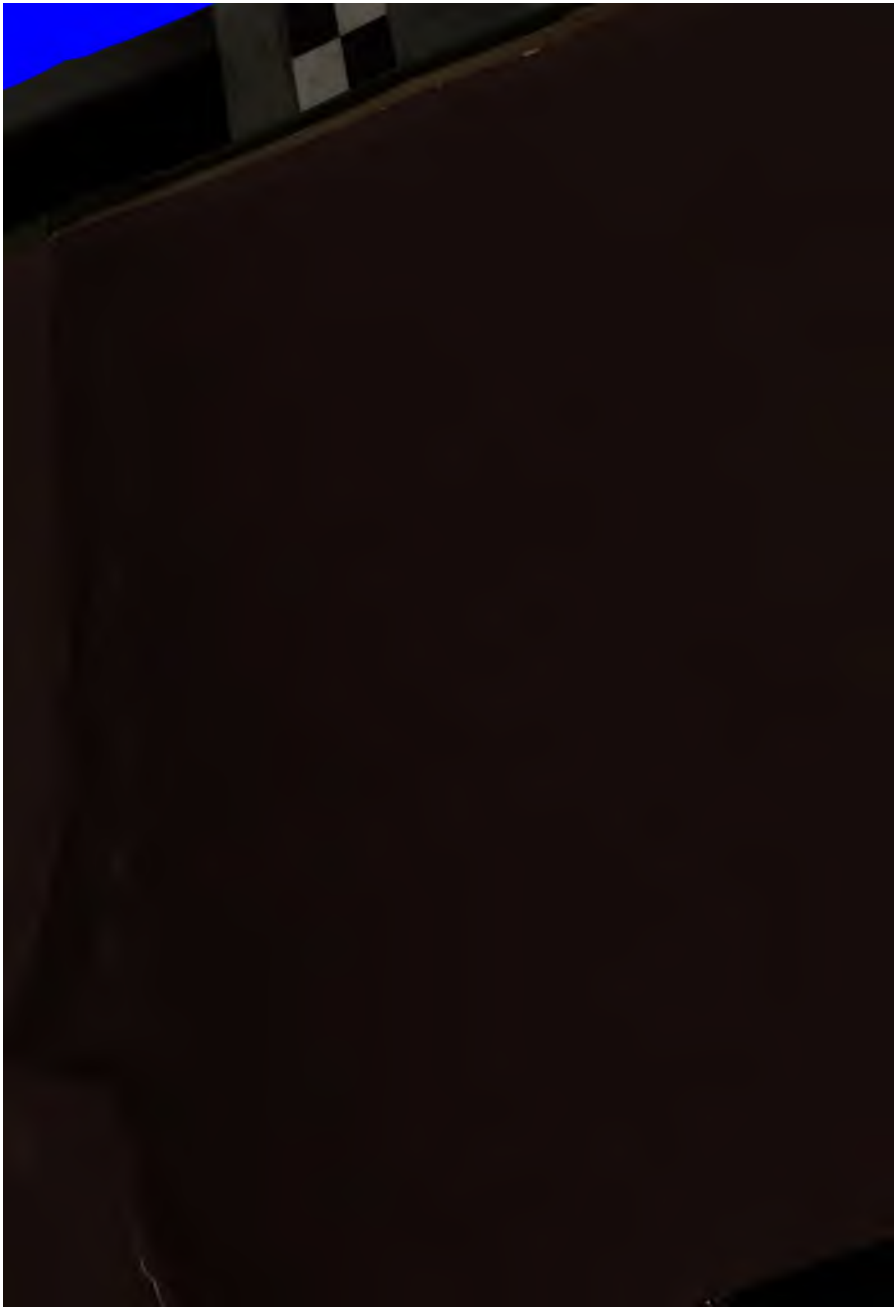

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CASTLE BLAIR

A STORY OF YOUTHFUL DAYS

BY

FLORA L. SHAW

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I

LONDON
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1878

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BLAIR CASTLE;

A STORY OF YOUTHFUL DAYS.

CHAPTER I.

It was raining hard. Night had closed in already round Castle Blair. In the park the great trees like giant ghosts loomed gloomily indistinct through the dim atmosphere. Not a sound was to be heard but the steady down-pour of descending rain, and, from time to time, a long, slow shudder of trees as the night wind swept over the park.

The darkness and the rain had it all their own way outside, but there was one spot of light in the landscape. The hall door of the castle stood open, and behind it, in hospitable Irish fashion, there blazed a fire from which the warm rays streamed out and

illumined the very rain itself; for the dampness outside caught the pleasant glow and reflected it back again, till all round about the doorway there was, as it were, a halo of golden mist. The stone arch of the door was hidden by it, but it formed in itself an arch above the shining granite steps,—a beautiful framework of light for certain little figures, who, dark and ruddy against the glowing back-ground of the hall, were to be seen dancing backwards and forwards as though impatiently waiting for something. They were only children, and impatiently waiting for something they certainly were. There were three of them, two fair-haired girls, and a boy.

"When will she come, I wonder?" said the elder of the girls, looking anxiously through the darkness in the direction of the avenue. "I'm sure the train must have been ever so late."

"Of course it was!" replied the boy; "it always is, and besides it would take half the day to get from Ballyboden in this weather. We ought to have sent a sailing vessel for her instead of the carriage."

"I say, Murtagh, I wonder what she *will* be like. Uncle Blair's never seen her. Donnie doesn't know

anything about her. It's very funny having French cousins one doesn't know anything about."

"Oh, she's sure to be all right; Uncle Harry was papa's favourite brother! But I wish Bobbo and Winnie had got in in time. Hark! what's that?"

"That" was a sound of carriage wheels, the sound the little listeners expected. It drew nearer and nearer, approaching slowly along the winding avenue; the wet gravel crunched under the wheels, and at last out of the darkness emerged a heavy old carriage drawn by a pair of heavy old horses.

"I say, David, look sharp!" called Murtagh from the doorway. The horses were startled into activity by an unexpected touch of the whip, and the next instant the carriage stopped at the bottom of the steps.

The boy who had spoken dashed down to open the door, but a sudden shyness seemed to fall upon his two companions, and they shrank back into the hall. There was, however, little to be afraid of in the girl who in another moment stood upon the threshold. She seemed to be about eighteen or nineteen. Tired and travel-stained though she looked, there was a quiet grace in the slight figure; and the face in its setting of ruffled gold

hair was as soft as it was sparkling. Her most remarkable feature was a pair of large, dark grey eyes which were looking out just now with a half-interested, half-wistful expression, that seemed to say this was no common arriving.

And indeed for her it was not. An absolute stranger, she was arriving for the first time at Castle Blair, to make a new home in a new country amongst relations she did not know. She had been told she was to live with an old bachelor uncle, and that was literally all the information she possessed. If the children, as their words had indicated, knew little about her, she knew still less of them, for she was not even aware of their existence.

Notwithstanding the first movement of hesitation the elder little girl seemed quite to understand that upon her devolved the duties of hostess, for she came forward now, and holding out her hand said shyly, "How do you do?"

The new comer felt shy too perhaps, but she took the hand and kept it in hers, drawing the child nearer to her as she answered in a sweet, clear voice: "I am very well, thank you, only a little tired with travelling. A long journey is very tiring."

"Yes, very," said the little girl, blushing again; and there the conversation would have been likely to stop, but the boy who had opened the carriage door, having taken the stranger's wraps from her, had now followed her into the hall and exclaimed heartily:

"Awfully tiring, and that drive from Ballyboden is so long. You must be very cold; come over to the fire."

As he spoke he dropped her rug and bag on the floor, and ran and pulled forward one of the wooden arm-chairs that were ranged along the wall on either side of the fire-place. "Did you see the fire as you came up?" he added; "the door had got shut somehow, but we opened it on purpose."

"Yes, I saw it just now," she replied, as after a minute's hesitation she seated herself in the chair. "It looked so pleasant and cheerful through the rain, it made me wish to get to it."

"A fire's rather a jolly thing to see after a long drive in the dark," said the boy; "and we do know how to make fires here if we don't know anything else."

The children evidently expected their guest to stay in the hall, so she unfastened her gloves, and drawing

them off held out two white hands to the blaze in quiet enjoyment of the warmth. Then after a pause, during which the children were studying her appearance, and she was wondering who her little companions might be, she turned again to the boy and said:

"We have not any one to introduce us to each other so we must introduce ourselves; I daresay you know my name is Adrienne. Will you tell me your name, and the names of your sisters."

The two girls blushed again, the little one shrinking behind the elder, but the boy replied at once:

"I'm Murtagh. That tallest one is Rosamond Mary; Rosie, we call her. She's twelve years old."

"No, Murtagh, you always make mistakes; I'm thirteen very nearly!" exclaimed Rosie, suddenly forgetting her shyness.

"Oh well! it's all the same. Of course, girls always like to be thought old," he explained, with a funny little chuckle, to Adrienne. "Besides, you won't be thirteen till the winter."

"And that little thing is Eleanor Grace," he continued, addressing himself to his duty as master of the ceremonies; "Ellie, she's called. She's only three.

Winnie's the best of them; she's worth two of Rosie; but she and Bobbo are out in the garden."

"Out! In this pouring rain?" said Adrienne, looking towards the open door.

"What does that matter?" returned Murtagh. "We don't mind rain. We're hardy little barbarians; you needn't expect to find us like dandy French children."

The boy spoke flippantly; he was evidently in a state of excited high spirits.

A merry twinkle woke in Adrienne's eyes. Already she was forgetting the fear of strange bachelor uncles.

"No," she replied, with a significant glance at the dishevelled state of the children's toilettes. "I did not think you were dandy."

Murtagh blushed in spite of himself, and looked deprecatingly at the knees of his somewhat worn knickerbockers, while his sister hastened to excuse herself.

"It really is impossible to keep tidy with the boys," she explained; "they do pull one about so."

"Come now, the boys didn't tear that dress; you tore it yourself on Tuesday, coming down a nut tree," said Murtagh.

A contemptuous reply from Rosie seemed likely to lead to a sharp answer, but Adrienne interposed a question. She felt quite at home with the children now, and she wanted to find out something about them.

"Do you always live here?" she asked.

"Of course we do!" answered both the children at once. "There's nowhere else where we could live since we came back from India."

"Are there any more of you besides Winnie and Bobbo?"

"No," said Murtagh, "that's all. And quite enough, I expect you'll think before long," he added, looking thoughtfully into the fire, and suddenly ceasing from his former flippant manner.

Still Adrienne looked as though she would like to know more, and after hesitating for a moment she continued: "Who else is there in the house? Who takes care of you?"

"Oh!" said Rosie, "there's Mrs. Donegan. She takes care of everything you know, and cooks the dinner and all that. Then there's Peggy Murphy. She does the schoolroom, and mends our clothes; and there's Kate Murphy; and then there's the new housemaid, and

Uncle Blair's man, Brown; and that's all except Mr. Plunkett."

"Mr. Plunkett!" repeated Murtagh in a tone of disgust.

"Oh he is so horrible," continued Rosie, who seemed prepared for any amount of chatter now she had thrown away her shyness. "He settles all about everything, and gives us our pocket-money on Saturdays, and gives Mrs. Donegan money to buy our clothes, and orders everybody about, and interferes. Mrs. Plunkett says his mother was a second cousin of Uncle Blair's mother, but I don't believe she was. He's quite vulgar; he doesn't have late dinner or anything. But he doesn't live in this house, you know; he lives in a house in the park."

"He's dot such a nice ickle baby," put in Ellie, who had come close to Adrienne, and had been following the conversation with wide-open eyes and ears.

"Has he?" said Adrienne, encircling the child with her arm. "What is it like?"

"It's dot two dreat big eyes and—"

"It's got a nose, Ellie, don't forget that," interrupted Murtagh mockingly.

Little Ellie was silenced; she flushed up, and tears

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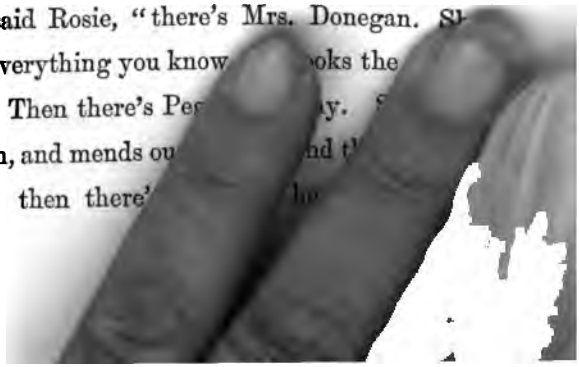

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came into her eyes. But without paying any attention to her Rosie continued:

"And that's all the people there are in the house."

"Except — Monsieur Blair," suggested Adrienne, comforting Ellie as she spoke by hanging her watch round the child's neck.

"Oh! Uncle Blair! Yes, of course he's here, only I forgot all about him."

"You don't see much of him?"

"No," said Murtagh, with a chuckle; "he thinks we're perfect little savages. He has breakfast with us every morning, because, you know, he thinks he ought to; but you should see how funny he looks. I believe he's always expecting us to set upon him and eat him, or do something of that kind."

"Hullo, Mrs. Donegan!" he called out suddenly, recovering his excited spirits as a good-humoured, shrewd-looking woman entered the hall. "There you are! and it's high time you came too. Here's a poor lady sitting freezing in the hall just for want of some one to show her to her room. Allow me to introduce Mrs. Bridget Donegan Esquire of Tipperary."

Adrienne acknowledged the introduction with a

smile, and Mrs. Donegan curtseying began at once to apologise for not having met her at the door.

"It's very sorry I am, Ma'am, that you should have been kept sitting out here. I've been waiting this last half-hour to hear the bell go," she began with much respectful dignity. And then suddenly turning round upon the children: "It's you, Master Murtagh, might ha' thought to ring it; and where's your manners, Miss Rose, to keep Miss Blair sitting out here in the cold instead of taking her into the drawing-room."

"It's not very cold," said Adrienne, with a smiling glance at the fire. But she rose as she spoke, and Mrs. Donegan continued: "Mr. Blair desired his compliments, Ma'am, and he was sorry he was engaged to dine out the evening you arrived, but he hoped the young ladies and gentlemen would make you comfortable. And, if you please, Ma'am, I've boiled a couple of fowls for you, and there's a nice little drop o' soup; and will you have dinner served in the dining-room, or wouldn't it be more comfortable like, if I sent it up with the children's tea into the school-room."

"Oh, I should like that much the best, please," said Adrienne. And the expression of relief that lighted up

her countenance was perhaps hardly complimentary to Mr. Blair.

"Then it's no use going to that smelly old drawing-room!" exclaimed Murtagh. "Come along to the school-room!"

He turned round as he spoke, and led the way across the hall, treating with silent contempt the expostulations of Rose and Mrs. Donegan, who were evidently of opinion that Adrienne ought first to be conducted to the drawing-room. He told Ellie to run on and open the door, so that there might be some light in the passage; but her little fingers not proving strong enough to turn the handle, the whole party had to grope their way in the dark. At the end of a long passage Rosie threw open a door, saying, "Here's the school-room! It's not particularly tidy. We did make it neat this morning, but somehow it always gets wrong again."

If it had been made neat that morning it certainly had got considerably wrong again. It was a good-sized room, with a large window at one end and another smaller one at the side. But the curtains were not drawn before either of them, and one was open, letting the rain beat in upon the carpet. The fire had burnt

low, and the fender was full of ashes and chestnut-husks. The rest of the room was so strewn with toys, books, cooking-utensils, and miscellaneous rubbish of every description, that there was some difficulty in distinguishing any article of furniture: only the tea-table, clean and white in the midst, stood out against the general disorder like an ark in a second deluge.

"Deed faith, it's time ye had some one to see after yez," muttered Mrs. Donegan to herself. "Where's Miss Winnie and Master Bobbo?" she added aloud.

"Gone to the garden to get some apples," answered Murtagh. "I wish they'd look sharp in."

"Well, when they do come in there isn't a dress for Miss Winnie to put on. All the print dresses are gone to the wash-tub, and she soaked her old black one through and through this morning."

"Oh well, she can dry herself all right. Don't you bother her about it and she won't bother you," replied Murtagh, good-humouredly, sitting down to the piano as he spoke, and beginning to play 'St. Patrick's Day in the Morning.'

"That's just the way it is with them all; there's no getting them to listen to reason; an' it isn't that they

at once. There's no use waitin' for Miss Winnie and Master Bobbo."

"Fire away," grunted Murtagh from the piano, executing some difficult chords with his left hand. His music was very good, quite unlike the playing of most children, and Adrienne began to think it pleasant to listen to as she lay back in the big chair Rosie had prepared for her.

But in another moment the music was interrupted by a rushing sound, a collision of some kind, and then a confusion of voices in the hall.

"Whatever are you thinking of, Master Bobbo?" came out clearly in Donnie's energetic tones.

"I do wish you'd look where you're going, Donnie; you've nearly knocked me into the middle of next week!" retorted a hearty boy's voice.

"Hurrah! here they are," cried Murtagh, and forgetting the interest of his music he started up and dashed into the hall. There was some whispering outside the door; Adrienne heard plainly, "What's she like?" and then Bobbo and Murtagh entered the room, followed by Winnie.

Bobbo was a pleasant strong-looking boy, with clear

eyes, rosy cheeks, and a turned-up nose, a contrast to Murtagh's sallow face and dark deep-set eyes.

Winnie was a little elf-like thing, and as she came in at the door, her scarlet cloak twisted all crooked with the wind, the skirt of her brown dress gathered up in both hands to hold the apples they had been to fetch, her hair beaten down over her forehead by the rain, her great dark eyes dancing, her cheeks glowing, the merry mouth ready to break into smiles, she seemed the very incarnation of life and brightness.

"The Queen of robin redbreasts!" was the idea that flashed through Adrienne's mind, and she sat up with revived animation to greet the new comers.

Bobbo walked up to her and said, "How do you do?" with a decidedly Irish intonation, retiring then behind her chair and entering into a whispered conversation with little Ellie.

Winnie advanced to the hearth-rug and dropped all her apples upon it, saying as she did so: "Fetch the dishes, Bobbo, from the pantry." Then she shook hands with Adrienne, looking at her with clear intelligent eyes.

"You have got your apples," said Adrienne. "Your

brother told me you were gone for them. He said you did not mind being wet."

"Mind being wet!" said Winnie, with a bright look of amusement; "of course we don't. Are you fond of apples?" she continued, looking down at the rosy fruit and wet leaves scattered on the hearth-rug. "We thought we'd have some for tea as you were coming, so Bobbo and I went to fetch them. We meant to have been in by the time you came only it was so dark it made us longer. See, here's a beauty!" she added, kneeling down upon the rug and picking out a specially fine Ribstone Pippin. "Do try this; I'm sure it's good."

She held it up towards Adrienne as she spoke, large and rich-coloured, still wet with rain, the cluster of leaves under which it had ripened yet crisp upon its stalk, and she looked so thoroughly persuaded of its deliciousness that Adrienne could not help taking it, and answered smilingly—

"I will have it for dessert after the chickens."

But with a sudden change of expression, forgetting all about Adrienne, Winnie turned to Murtagh, and exclaimed eagerly—

"Oh, it has been such fun getting these; wasn't it, Bobbo? I *must* tell you all about it. Well, we got past Bland's cottage all safe enough; the rain and the wind were making such a jolly row there wasn't a chance of our being heard."

"Bland's the gardener," explained Murtagh to Adrienne, "and he always tries to catch us when we bag the fruit."

"But just as we were nearly in the garden," continued Winnie,—"Bobbo was on the top of the gate, and I'd got up as far as the lock,—what should we hear but Bland coming, tramp, tramp, along the gravel; and Bobbo was such an awful little muff, he called out: 'I say, he's got a lantern, an' he's sure to see us.' And, of course, don't you see that made him hear us, and it would be all up if we couldn't get hid quick enough; so I jumped down and squeezed in under a bush, but when Bobbo tried to get down, one of the spikes of the gate went through his knickerbockers, and there he stuck. On came Bland, and called out: 'Ha! ye good-for-nothing vagabones; it's caught ye are this time!' and, lo and behold! it wasn't Bland at all, but a great big policeman. He pulled Bobbo down off the gate, and didn't he tear

a fine hole in the back of his knickerbockers, just? Poor Bobbo got in such a fright he couldn't say a word, so I jumped out from under the bush, and I said: 'We're not stealing! we're only going to take some apples for tea. We're ladies and gentlemen.' So he looked at the hole in Bobbo's clothes as if he wasn't quite sure, so I said: 'You tore that, taking him off the gate!' Bobbo did look awfully untidy though, with the light of the lantern shining full on the raggy part of him. Then he turned the lantern on to my face, and then he laughed, and said: 'I'm sure I beg your pardon, Miss; I hadn't an idea it would be any one but ragamuffins out o' the village about this wild night.'

"So I said, very politely, you know: 'Please *would* you just help us over the gate? It's so very high to climb when the bars are slippery with rain.' So he helped us both over, and then I said: 'Would you mind just standing about here till we come back? And if you hear Bland coming give a good loud whistle, will you?' So he said he would, and we ran off and got the apples, and then he helped us back over the gate again, and we gave him some apples, and here we are. By-the-bye, Bobbo, I've left my hat up in that

first apple tree. But wasn't it jolly fun making the policeman keep watch for us?"

"Awfully jolly!" said Murtagh. "What's his number? we'll make him do it to-morrow night too. No, no, Winnie; that's not the way to settle those apples. Put the streaked one next the rosy ones. So. Now put a yellow one, and a Virginian creeper leaf. There; that's it! You've no more eye for colour than a steam-engine."

Tired though she was, Adrienne's face had glistened with responsive fun as Winnie, with expressive gestures, described their little adventure. She had not the least idea who these children were, but they were merry and charming, and their manners put her at her ease.

Just as Winnie stopped speaking the schoolroom door was pushed slowly open, and Rosie entered, carefully holding in both hands a salver upon which was a glass of wine. "You looked so tired," she said to Adrienne, "that I thought you'd better have this without waiting for tea."

"Thank you," said Adrienne. The wine was just what she needed, and as she put the glass back upon

the salver she added gratefully: "You are accustomed to be mistress of a house I see."

Rosie flushed with pleasure, and replied: "There's nobody but me except when Cousin Jane's here. I'll go and see now about hurrying tea; I can't think what they're taking such a time for."

"But my room," suggested Adrienne again; "if I might go to it first, I am so dusty."

"Oh yes!" said Rosie, "I'll be back in a minute;" and she departed on her errand to the kitchen.

"I'll show you your room if you like," said Winnie, jumping up from the floor. "Come along!"

But the fire was drawing clouds of steam from the child's wet clothes, and as Adrienne looked towards her she perceived it.

"Do you know," she exclaimed in dismay, "your dress must be quite wet through? Please do not mind about my room, but go and change it quickly."

"Oh, it doesn't hurt me being wet," laughed Winnie.

"Besides," said Murtagh, "she hasn't got anything to change into. Didn't you hear Donnie say all her clothes were in the wash-tub?"

Adrienne hesitated. She did not like to insist. At the same time she had already made such friends with these children that she felt as though it were somehow her business to prevent them catching cold.

"Haven't you a dressing-gown?" she asked at length. "I think it must be very bad to stay so wet as that."

"Oh yes!" said Winnie, "I'll go and undress and put on my dressing-gown, then I'll be ready to jump into bed without any more trouble; that'll be rather fun. Do you know where my dressing-gown is, Murtagh?" she added, as she danced off towards the door. "You had it last, the day we were dressing up, don't you remember?"

"I'm sure I don't know where we left it," replied Murtagh, pausing to contemplate the dishes with his head on one side and an apple in each hand. "It's somewhere about, I suppose."

"Oh, well, never mind. I'll get Rosie's. Don't finish settling those apples till I come down;" and she vanished into the passage.

Murtagh dropped the apples which he held, and jumped up.

"Shall I show you your room?" he asked, taking a candle from the chimney-piece and turning with sudden politeness to Adrienne. "You really must want to get your things off. Let me carry your umbrella. And you would like to have your bag. We left it in the hall, I think."

He led the way, as he spoke, out again into the hall, and crossing over to the other end began to mount a broad oak staircase.

It was dark with age, and the light of the candle which Murtagh carried sufficed to show that in places bits of carving had dropped or been broken from the high wainscot and massive balustrade; doors were let into the wainscoting, and two of them stood open, but they only disclosed dark distances that seemed to tell of long passages or descending flights of steps.

Murtagh was quite silent at first, preceding Adrienne by a few steps, but when they reached the corridor above he fell back so as to walk beside her.

She said something about the house being very large.

"Yes, and it seems beastly lonely to you now; doesn't it?" he said in a tone different from any he had used before. "I did feel so nasty at first when we

came from India. But you must cheer up, you know; you won't think us so bad, I expect, when you get accustomed to us, and it's a dear old place. There's a beautiful river full of rocks, and real wild mountains with heather on them."

"I'm sure I shall like everything," she replied warmly.

"Well, you know," said Murtagh, thoughtfully, "we're awfully rampageous and everything. That's why people don't like us. You see we can't help it exactly, we're always that way." There was a half-sad undertone in the boy's voice, and his companion turned her sweet eyes kindly upon him as she answered, "You've been very kind to me."

He looked gratified, but he put an end to the conversation by throwing open a door and exclaiming, "This is your room."

It was a large, comfortable room with old-fashioned, faded furniture, and a great four-post bed; the big fire that blazed cheerily at one end filling it all with warm light and dancing shadows.

"Have you got water, and all that kind of thing?" he inquired with a look round the room.

"Yes, thank you. Will you unfasten that little box for me?"

Murtagh, having unfastened the box and poked the fire, retired, saying that he would come and fetch her as soon as tea was ready; and the girl was left alone to realise that her new life had actually begun.

She was an orphan. Her mother had been French, her father was the uncle Harry of whom the children spoke. But both had died while she was yet a baby, and her father had particularly desired that after being brought up by her mother's relations in France she should as soon as she was old enough go to live with his brother John.

From her babyhood she had known that she was to come to Ireland when she was eighteen. Though she had never seen her uncle John, nor even heard from him directly, his arrangements for her had been always so kindly and generous that she had been taught to think of him with both affection and respect. With her French blood she had inherited, too, French adaptability. No one could like having to come to live with strangers, but it was not so bad as having to do as many of her companions had done—marry a perfect stranger;

it had to be borne, and she was fully prepared to make the best of it. She was quite ready to be interested in the place and its inhabitants. This rambling house with its dark corridors, its old staircase and endless doors, telling of unoccupied rooms, was unlike anything she had ever seen in France; the idea of living in it pleased her. Irish ways certainly seemed different from any that she knew; but she had expected that they would be different, and the children had received her with such quaint familiarity that already, to an extent she could hardly have believed possible, she felt at home.

CHAPTER II.

At eight o'clock next morning, as a great bell ringing through the house announced that breakfast was ready, Murtagh and Rosie set off together from the school-room to fetch their guest, both of them anxious for the glory of introducing her to their uncle.

By the time they got up-stairs Adrienne had already left her room, and was standing in the strip of sunlight that streamed through her open door, looking doubtfully down the corridor. She wore a rough grey woollen dress, fastened at the throat with a knot of bright blue ribbon, and in her belt she had put two or three red leaves from the Virginian creeper that clustered round her window. The sunlight, shining full upon her golden hair, made of the whole a picture that was extremely satisfactory to Murtagh's eye.

"I say, Rosie!" he exclaimed, standing still in the dark end of the corridor, "doesn't she look jolly like that?"

"Yes, isn't she pretty? I expect she's had all her clothes made in Paris too," Rosie replied in an enthusiastic whisper, which betrayed that however much the young lady's education had been neglected in other respects, there were some things she did reverence.

"Paris!" retorted Murtagh, contemptuously. But at that moment Adrienne perceived them, and came forward with a bright "Good morning."

"I guessed that the bell meant breakfast," she continued, "and I was wondering how I should find my way to the dining-room."

"That's why we came," said Rosie; "and then there's Uncle Blair, you know, you haven't seen him yet."

"No," said Adrienne. "And the others?" she continued after a little pause, "where are they? Are they in the dining-room?"

"Oh, Bobbo's in bed, I think," replied Rosie, "but he'll be down in a minute or two; and Winnie's—out," she added, letting her voice drop mysteriously at the last word

"Then she did go?" asked Murtagh eagerly.

"Yes, quite early, while it was dark, about three o'clock, I think; the stable clock struck, but I was so sleepy I couldn't count."

"Is it a secret?" asked Adrienne.

"Well, it's not exactly—at least it's a sort of a secret," replied Rose, doubtfully. She looked at Murtagh as she spoke, to see what he thought; but he was looking at Adrienne, and she had to decide for herself.

"I think you might know," she continued. "She's gone to the Liss of Voura to see if she can see the—Fairies." The last word came out with a vivid blush.

"They say they dance there every morning when the sun rises. But I daresay it's not true," she added in a would-be careless tone, her scepticism arising not from any doubt in the fairies' existence, but from a sudden fear that Adrienne might think such ideas ridiculous.

"Why shouldn't it be true I should like to know?" asked Murtagh, with a somewhat fierce ring of championship in his tone. But they had reached the dining-room, and Rosie gladly avoided the necessity for answering by throwing open the door and ushering Adrienne into the presence of Mr. Blair.

He had been sitting reading the newspaper, but as they entered he rose and stretched out both hands to Adrienne, saying in a warm gentle voice: "My dear child, you are very welcome."

As Adrienne advanced, blushing a little, to lay her hands in his, he gazed at her with something of surprised tenderness in his face, and murmured, "Rénée!" Then he added aloud: "What is your name, my dear?"

"Adrienne," she answered.

"Ah, yes, yes. That was her name too," he said dreamily to himself. Then drawing out a chair from the table he continued: "Sit down, and make the tea; I shan't have to do it for myself any more now."

She sat down as she was told, and began to busy herself with the tea-making. Her uncle stood beside her some little time in silence watching her movements.

"Why didn't they tell me you were so like your mother?" he asked presently.

"My mother!" exclaimed Adrienne. "Am I like her? She died so along ago I don't remember her at all," she added sadly.

"Yes, yes; only two years after she married him. It's a long time ago now. How old are you, my dear?"

"I was eighteen my last birthday," replied Adrienne; but her uncle did not seem to hear. He walked away to his place at the bottom of the table, and his next remark was to ask Rosie where the other children were. Rosie answered sedately that she thought they were coming presently, all except Winnie; and breakfast proceeded in silence till Bobbo came tumbling into the room with little Ellie following upon his heels.

He did not speak to any one, and would have taken his place at once at the breakfast table; but as Adrienne naturally held out her hand and said "Good morning," he came round and shook hands with her, asking with a hearty look out of his frank blue eyes whether she had got rested yet. Then, though the children kept up a half-whispered conversation between themselves at their end of the table, they did not speak either to their uncle or to Adrienne. Mr. Blair maintained complete silence, and Adrienne devoted herself to Ellie, whose high chair was placed beside her.

The little thing was too shy to speak much, but she looked her surprise and delight at the nicely cut fingers of bread and butter which Adrienne built up into castles on her blue plate, and watched with almost

solemn interest the important, and, to her, altogether novel operation of sifting sugary snow upon the roofs of them. Then, as she grew bolder, a little rosy finger was put out, and when some of the snow fell upon it there came such a merry peal of baby laughter that Adrienne laughed too, and Mr. Blair looked up in benign astonishment.

The other children regarded with some surprise the consideration with which the wants of their small sister were supplied, but their chief attention was devoted to their breakfast.

They eat continuously till their hunger was appeased; then Murtagh pushed out his chair, and they all went away, not having been more than a quarter of an hour in the room.

Mr. Blair had finished his breakfast, and was apparently absorbed again in the reading of his newspaper, so Adrienne quietly prepared to follow the children. But as she moved across the room her uncle looked up.

"You have had a sorry welcome, I am afraid, my dear," he said; "but I hope you will be able soon to feel that, for all that, we are none the less glad to have you amongst us." He rose, as he spoke, and walked

slowly towards the fire-place were Adrienne stood. "You understand, of course," he continued, "that so long as you live with me you are mistress here. Donegan is very anxious to make you comfortable, but I daresay she may not know everything you require. So you must just make yourself as much at home as you can from the very first, and order anything you want. May I trust you to do this?"

"You are very kind," Adrienne replied gratefully. Then as she looked up at the kind dreamy face that was turned towards her she was encouraged to add: "But I had a very kind welcome; the children were watching for me, and they took charge of me."

"Ah yes, the children," replied her uncle. "You must try and put up with them as well as you can. Mr. Plunkett tells me that they are very unruly; but they are the children of my brother Launcelot, and till he sends for them they will remain here. Who knows," he added in the tone of one struck by a sudden idea; "perhaps you will not mind having them; they may serve as a sort of companion for you, my poor child. I am afraid you will be very lonely here."

"Do you mean," said Adrienne puzzled, "you thought

I would not like to have the children? Oh, but I am so glad!" And there was no questioning the sudden lighting up of her face. "I was so afraid," she continued; then a vivid blush interrupted the new sentence, and she ended in some confusion—"I love children very much."

"They are very lucky," said her uncle, with a glance of admiration at the pretty confused figure that stood before him on the hearthrug.

"I did not mean,"—she began, responding half-laughingly to the amused look in his face, and at the same time colouring more deeply as she saw that he had divined the end of her sentence.

"My dear child," he interrupted, "you did not mean anything but what was perfectly natural,—that you dreaded the dulness of living alone with a worn-out old man. And I am right glad to find that the children are likely to be a pleasure to you instead of a worry; indeed, I wonder I did not think of that before, for there is only just enough difference of age between you," he added, smiling, "to make *you* delightful to me; while the others!—" An expression of comic despair finished the sentence.

"But now," he continued, "you will be a Godsend to all of us. Since you care about children you will look after them a little for me. And as for them; well, even I will credit them with good taste enough to appreciate in some measure at least the privilege of having such a little guardian. And now, my dear, I will not keep you any longer."

He bent forward, as he spoke, and touched her forehead with his lips. Then with a kindly pressure of the hand he walked to the door, and held it open while she passed out. His rooms lay in the opposite direction to those occupied by the children, so outside the dining-room he turned away; and Adrienne, after crossing the hall and wandering about a little among smaller passages, was guided by the sound of voices to a door which she recognized at once, thanks to a crooked brass handle and the letters "L. B." cut with a penknife in the brown wood above the lock.

She opened it, and found herself straightway in the presence of all the children. The large window at the end of the room was open wide, and Winnie seated sideways on the window-sill, with her head resting against the grey stone frame-work, was eating a large hunch of

bread. A flock of pigeons and white ducks clamoured for scraps on the terrace outside; curled up in her lap lay four small kittens, and the big mother cat sat sunning herself upon the window-sill; but Winnie seemed to be paying only a mechanical attention to her pets. She was white from want of food, and there was a general air of pre-occupation and disappointment in her attitude, —disappointment which seemed to have communicated itself in a measure to the other children, who stood grouped around her.

"No," she was saying as Adrienne entered; "it's just Peggy's rubbish, and there's an end of it."

"Well, but," said Murtagh doubtfully, "they might be there another day and not be there to-day."

"No," returned Winnie decidedly; "I don't believe they're ever there. It was quite dark when I got up on the Liss, and I hid under a bush and watched with my eyes wide open till it was blazing light all over everywhere, and I didn't see a single thing, and there—there's an end of it. It's just rubbish!" She flung a piece of crust out on the grass as she spoke, so that the poor ill-used ducks had to turn round and waddle quite a journey before they got it. But perhaps

even ducks can look reproachful, for she broke almost immediately another bit from her hunch of bread, and threw it to a fat laggard, with a compassionate—"There, poor old Senior, that's for you." And then, turning more gently to Murtagh, she said: "Never mind, Myrrh, you know it wasn't any use believing it if it wasn't true."

Murtagh did not answer. But suddenly an idea crossed Bobbo's mind, and he exclaimed, half-doubtfully: "Win, do you think—they might have known you were coming, and perhaps they didn't choose for you to see them?"

The notion seemed to find some favour with the other children. Winnie glanced at Murtagh to see what he thought; but Murtagh, who had been aware of Adrienne's entrance, was looking to her, so Winnie's eyes followed his.

"No, I do not think that exactly," said Adrienne slowly, finding that she was expected to speak. She seated herself on the window-sill, opposite Winnie, and began to stroke the old cat. Then she continued in the same slow thoughtful tone: "Once I used to believe in fairies as you do, and I used to want to see

them, but I never did. I used to think I did sometimes, but I never did. Then I began to think they could not be true, and that made me very unhappy, for I loved them so. I don't think you can love them as much as I did. Everything that happened to me I used to think the fairies were there; you see, I wasn't like you; I was all alone, and hadn't anybody but the fairies. When it was fine I thought the fairies were in the sun; when it rained I thought they were in the rain. I thought they were in the flowers, in the moon, —everywhere, in everything. But still I began to be afraid they could not be true.

"I do not know how long that lasted, but I remember quite, quite well the day when it was all finished—the very last day when I ever believed in them.

"It was when I was eight years old. It was one wet winter afternoon. I had been alone nearly all day, and I had been standing a long time by the window watching the rain beat down upon the pavement. It was growing dark, but still I did not go away; for I always used to think the little splashes were water-fairies dancing, and I liked to watch them. I was thinking about them, and half-dreaming, I think, when

suddenly, quite suddenly, I seemed to know that they were not fairies at all—nothing but water-splashes. I felt almost frightened, and I went away from the window and sat down on the hearthrug in front of the fire. But then the sight of the fire reminded me that there were no fire-fairies either; no fairies anywhere all over the world. It seemed such a dreadful thing to know; and I couldn't help it,—I just hid my face in the hearthrug, and cried like a little baby."

The children had fixed their eyes with interest and sympathy on Adrienne, but her attention was apparently concentrated on stroking old Griffin who purred in the sunshine.

"I never shall forget that afternoon," she continued, "I was so very unhappy; and it wasn't only that afternoon; for months afterwards I couldn't bear to think of a fairy. But the reason I tell you about it," she added, raising her eyes and looking towards the children, "is because afterwards it went away. One of my uncles came to live with us, and he told me about the true fairies; I mean the angels; and I have believed them ever since. And so you need not be disappointed because the fairies do not really dance where Winnie

went to look, because the angels are better, and they are true. Some people don't think the angels are all round us everywhere as the fairies were, but I do. I think it is so beautiful to believe that they are everywhere, in everything; sent down from heaven to make the flowers sweet, and the fruit ripe, and to put good into us."

She looked out, as she finished speaking, to the sunny park, where the great trees stood in all their autumn glory. The children looked out too and were silent. Just for the moment they were all feeling, as it were, the presence of angels.

But suddenly Bobbo was struck by another idea. "Why you're talking English!" he exclaimed. "But you know you're French! I'd forgotten all about it!" He seemed quite excited by his discovery, and Adrienne began to laugh.

"Oh yes!" cried Winnie, "of course you are, and Murtagh and I had got some things ready to say. Hadn't we, Murtagh? 'Comment vous portez vous,' and 'Parlez vous Anglais.'"

"I am very well, thank you," said Adrienne, with a little mock bow. "And I speak English just as

easily as I do French. We lived for years in England, you know, and then I always had English governesses. Grand'mère knew, of course, that I was coming here, so she paid particular attention to my English."

"Oh!" said all the children in chorus; and then Rosie, colouring violently, asked a question which it had evidently been agreed beforehand that she should ask.

"What did you say your name was? Murtagh says it's *Adrenne;* but *that* isn't a name exactly at all, is it?"

"Yes," said Adrienne, smiling. "He is quite right; Adrienne Marie Véronique Erstein Blair!"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Bobbo, doubling himself up as though the very sound gave him a pain. "What a name to go to bed with! Do you expect us to say all that every time we want the door shut?"

The faces of the other children were so full of genuine dismay that Adrienne laughed outright.

"Grand'mère used to call me Reine," she said; "that's a little shorter, isn't it?"

"Yes, but," said Murtagh doubtfully, "'Rain!' It's not pretty, or anything. You're not a bit rainy-looking."

"Pitter, patter! Drip, drop, dropsy!" exclaimed Bobbo, his blue eyes lighting up impudently.

"Hush, Bobbo, be quiet; you're behaving very rudely," said Rosie, with a little anxious glance at Adrienne. "We can't call you by any of those names," she added in her pleasantest voice, "they are not pretty enough."

"Would you mind saying your name again, please," said Murtagh, looking puzzled; "the first one, I mean, that we'll have to call you by?"

Adrienne repeated it slowly once or twice, and the children said it after her. But they didn't seem satisfied with their own pronunciation.

"It will never be the same as yours," exclaimed Bobbo, after two ineffectual attempts. "I'll call you Topsy; it's much easier!"

"I'll tell you what," said Winnie, who had been silently finishing her piece of bread. "Suppose we call her Nessa, after poor Nessa that died." She spoke slowly as children do speak when their words are full of sad memories; and she looked doubtfully at the others, not sure what they would think of her proposition. They hesitated, and a grave silence fell for a moment on

the little group. Adrienne regretted that she had been the means of saddening them.

"Who was Nessa?" she asked at length gently.

"She was so pretty," said Winnie, "with long soft brown hair and beautiful big eyes."

"I think she *was* a little bit like you," said Murtagh; "only her hair was browner than yours."

"Oh, Murtagh!" exclaimed Rosie.

"Was she as old as me?" asked Adrienne.

"Oh, no," said Murtagh, "she was quite young; but she did bark so beautifully."

"She did *what!*" exclaimed Adrienne.

"Bark! bark at all the strangers that came near the place."

"Oh!" said Adrienne, completely taken aback. "Then—then—she must have been a dog!"

"Yes," said Rosie, hurriedly. "It's ridiculous Murtagh saying she was like you; she was only a little dog that we found in the road."

"Why, what else did you suppose she was?" asked Murtagh in surprise.

"I—I thought," said Adrienne, blushing, and then

brimming over with laughter,—"I thought she was your elder sister."

The children greeted her speech with such peals of laughter that the sadness connected with Nessa was effectually dispersed, and no further hesitation was entertained as to Adrienne's name. Nothing could she be now but "Nessa;"—"Our elder sister Nessa," as Murtagh half-impudently, half-admiringly called her.

"And it's perfect nonsense, Rosie," said Murtagh, "to say that the other Nessa wasn't like her. Her hair was darker, and so were her eyes; but there was a sort of likeness about them all the same,—a sort of golden look in their faces; wasn't there, Winnie?"

"How silly you are, Murtagh!" replied Rosie contemptuously, "just as if a dog could be like a real grown-up person."

"Yes, they can," replied Murtagh; "and I heard papa saying one day to a gentleman who had a blue ribbon on his coat, at one of the big dinner-parties, that everybody has a sort of a likeness to some animal. There!"

"Then if they have, you're like a little black monkey," replied Rosie, hotly and inconsequently; "but

it's nonsense all the same, silly nonsense, to say that a little brown dog out on the road is like this Nessa!"

"But it isn't nonsense, Rosie, when I see—" began Murtagh.

Rosie contemptuously turned her back upon him, and Winnie remarked quietly:

"It's no use arguing with Rosie, you know, Myrrh."

"The only chance with her is to knock her down and sit upon her," said Bobbo, good-humouredly indifferent.

Murtagh paid no attention to either of them, but followed Rosie, exclaiming eagerly: "Can't you understand if I see a likeness—" Rosie never listened to what her opponent said, and perhaps she thought he was going to follow Bobbo's advice, for she pushed him away so violently that he lost his balance and fell over little Ellie, who was, as usual, sitting upon the floor. The child began to scream; Adrienne sprang forward to pick her up; and in the midst of the confusion the door opened, and Peggy's voice made itself heard, saying: "Whisht, Miss Ellie; get up, Mr. Murtagh, dear; here's Mr. Plunkett."

"Hang Mr. Plunkett!" muttered Murtagh, getting up slowly, and pulling his jacket straight. Adrienne had already picked up Ellie, and carried her in her arms back to the window-sill, but the child had been hurt; and, nothing abashed by the sight of the correct-looking person who appeared in the doorway, she continued to roar with all her might, her little red face puckered up, and bright salt tears dropping on Adrienne's shoulder.

Mr. Plunkett stood in the doorway surveying the scene.

"Is this the best specimen, sir, that you can give Miss Blair of your behaviour?" he inquired sternly, addressing Murtagh.

Murtagh made no answer.

"And you are not content," continued Mr. Plunkett, looking at Rosie's hot angry face, "with displaying such unruliness yourself, but you draw all your brothers and sisters after you."

Murtagh walked over to the piano and began to arrange the music, humming, "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe."

"Incorrigible boy!" said Mr. Plunkett in an undertone. Then turning to Adrienne he saluted her with a

bow and a respectfully polite, "Miss Blair, I presume."

Notwithstanding the first movement of hostility that his manner was likely to excite, there was a certain severe dignity in his bearing that commanded respect. He wished to be courteous to Adrienne, and though his piercing eyes did not soften in the least while he spoke with her, he said well and politely all that was natural for him to say to a newly-arrived inmate of Blair Castle.

Yet it was certainly not even his politest manner that commanded respect. It was something deeper—something that seemed indeed almost hidden by his manner; a strength of some kind, the presence of which was felt at once through all the superficial accidents of his nature.

Adrienne, engaged in soothing Ellie, replied to his remarks with a certain gracious gentleness peculiar to her. Presently the child forgot her grief in a sudden curiosity as to the method of buttoning and unbuttoning Adrienne's dress, and with the tears still glistening on her cheeks she began to smile with pleasure as she poked her little fingers through the button-holes. Then

Adrienne wiped away the tears, and the conversation with Mr. Plunkett grew into a more animated discussion of the beauties of the surrounding country.

"I hope," said Mr. Plunkett at length, "that you will be kind enough to let me know if there is anything you desire. It is Mr. Blair's wish that I should do everything in my power to make you comfortable. As for the children, when they trouble you, pray have no hesitation in applying to me for assistance. And I hope," he added, raising his voice a little, and addressing the children without looking at them, "that common hospitality will induce you to inflict as little as possible of your wildness upon your cousin."

Adrienne thanked him, but looking across at the children, she said: "I think we are going to be friends; aren't we?"

The children's faces, more or less expressive, showed their acceptance of the treaty. Mr. Plunkett looked as though he felt somehow vaguely disapprobatory; and then, turning round to Murtagh, he changed the subject by saying severely:

"I hear, sir, that you have been at your old tricks again, stealing fruit from the garden."

"You heard wrong, then," returned Murtagh, his brow lowering.

"Don't add untruth to your other misdeeds; you were seen by one of the policemen. It is useless to deny it."

"*Gentlemen* don't tell lies," returned Murtagh, with a sneering accentuation of the words that made them nothing less than insulting. Adrienne was shocked and astonished at the scene. From where she sat on the window-sill, behind Mr. Plunkett, she looked across at Murtagh, while Mr. Plunkett answered angrily:

"What do you mean by speaking to me in such a manner?"

Murtagh's eyes met Adrienne's, and perhaps the expression that he found there made some impression on him. His features relaxed a little, and he remained silent.

Mr. Plunkett continued: "I am tired of speaking of this robbing of the garden. I see nothing but strong measures are of any use, and I give you fair warning that the next time any of you are caught in the garden you shall be severely punished." Mr. Plunkett evidently intended his words to end the conversation, but Murtagh looked blacker than ever, and some answer as bitter as

the last trembled on his lips. Before he had time to speak, however, Adrienne exclaimed innocently:

"Why, how the time is going! Don't let me keep you all in-doors. I must unpack a little, and write a letter; but if you will go out now I will join you as soon as I am ready."

Murtagh looked perversely inclined to stay where he was, but an appealing glance from Adrienne persuaded him to follow the others, who rushed at once into the passage.

"Those children are running perfectly wild," said Mr. Plunkett; "they make their own laws, and are the annoyance of every one in the place. It is little short of madness to keep them here under the present conditions; but Winnie and Murtagh suffered severely from fever in India, and Mr. Launcelot Blair refuses to send them to school. It is mistaken treatment. The discipline of school would be far better for them than the riotous life they lead. But it is, of course, for their parents to decide."

"Do they do no lessons at all?" asked Adrienne.

"They do nothing useful, Miss Blair," said Mr. Plunkett severely. Then changing the subject with a

decision that showed he wished to say no more upon the matter, he returned to his former measured courteous manner; and after a little further conversation, he wished Adrienne "Good morning," and left her to write her letters.

Whatever Mr. Plunkett might think of the children, they had, as has been seen, no high opinion of him. On this occasion they were no sooner well outside the school-room than Bobbo relieved his feelings by exclaiming:

"Oh, that brute Plunkett! wouldn't I like to punch his head!"

"It's no good thinking about him, Myrrh," said Winnie, seeing that the black look had not faded from Murtagh's face. "Let's do something. Shall we go and steal some more apples? I am awfully hungry."

"Oh, no!" said Rosie, "don't let us do that; but I'll tell you what'll be fun. Let's get some brown cake from Donnie, and go and boil potatoes on one of the islands."

Winnie agreeing, the little girls ran off to the kitchen; and Bobbo, left alone with Murtagh, returned to his subject.

"I say, Murtagh," he continued, "we must just do

something to that old Plunkett. He's getting worse and worse."

"I think I'll kill him some day!" burst out Murtagh, with such concentrated passion in his voice that Bobbo looked at him quite startled, and paused for a minute before he answered:

"I don't vote for killing exactly. But I'd like to dip him in the river, or do something or other that would just take him down a peg."

But Murtagh did not seem disposed to talk any more about it at that moment. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and slowly followed the others to the kitchen, where Mrs. Donegan was buttering slices of brown cake, and at the same time declaring that "she wasn't going to be getting them into bad habits of eating between their meals."

CHAPTER III.

ADRIENNE'S letters were very quickly written. She was anxious to go out to the children, and to make acquaintance with the place. But when she went to look for them they were nowhere to be found.

Enchanted with the place, which, neglected as it was, seemed to her very beautiful, she wandered about for a time in the pleasure-ground and shrubberies that lay at the back of the house; and then, tempted by the lovely brightness of the morning, she set off to make further discoveries.

Land seemed to be no consideration in that part of the world; a wide park, dotted with trees and clustering bushes, lay stretched out on three sides of the house. The grass was too wet to cross after yesterday's rain, but a sunny avenue, winding away between old thorns

and oaks, offered a charming walk, and as Adrienne went along she looked around her in delight.

On the left the ground sloped down to the bed of a broad rocky stream, which wound about and flowed, as she knew, past that end of the house in which was the big window of the school-room. To the right, undulating park-land stretched for some distance, and, beyond the park, trees and fields and hedges seemed to grow closer and closer together, till out of the indistinctness rose suddenly a bold line of purple hills. In the park soft-eyed cows were cropping the autumn grass. Thrushes were singing in the thorns. Red haws lay scattered in profusion under the trees. The air was pure, and the earth smelt sweet after the rain.

Adrienne was so glad the place was pretty that for more than half a mile she walked along, just enjoying it and thinking of nothing else. She had for the moment forgotten the children, when, enticed by a little side path, she turned off the avenue and came suddenly upon a child standing on tiptoe in the wet grass, and stretching up in a vain endeavour to reach a branch of roseberries that hung temptingly out from a clump of bushes. She was not the least like the children

Adrienne had seen hitherto. A sylph-like, tender little thing, she looked as though a sudden gust of wind would blow her right away. And then she was carefully dressed; the golden hair that hung down to her waist was neatly brushed, and the hand stretched up to the roseberries was cased in a warm cloth glove.

Adrienne stepped on to the grass and succeeded in reaching the branch. Blushing and surprised the little girl thanked her with a sweet smile. At the same moment a voice exclaimed, "Marion, Marion, for goodness sake come off that sopping grass!" and looking up, Adrienne perceived a lady, in a shiny black silk gown, who with an anxious face was hurrying down the path.

"Let me see your feet," she continued, coming up to them and taking Marion's hand as the child stepped obediently on to the path. "Yes, they're soaking wet! You must come back and change them at once! I beg your pardon, Miss Blair," she added, looking up at Adrienne. "I know I ought to have spoken to you first, but this child is so delicate she keeps me in a perpetual fright. How could you think of going on the grass, Marion?"

"I'm so sorry, mother," replied the child in her sweet little voice, "I quite forgot."

"Well, well, come back and change as quickly as you can, and perhaps there'll be no harm done. And you, Miss Blair, I am sure your feet must be wet too! Will you come in, and let me have your boots dried in the kitchen? The house is quite close. I am Mrs. Plunkett."

The last piece of information came out with an odd little confused jerk. It was an after-thought for which Adrienne was grateful; she had not the slightest idea who her newly-made acquaintance might be.

"Thank you," she said; "I don't think my feet are at all wet. I was only on the grass for a moment."

"Ah! but you don't know this climate; it is most treacherous; you have no idea how the wet penetrates. Marion, don't bring that litter into the house, there's a good child." As she spoke she pulled the branch of roseberries out of Marion's hand and threw it away, continuing in the mean time without a single full stop between her sentences: "There's nothing more dangerous than wet feet, I can assure you—I lost my poor sister through nothing in the world but that,—and Mr.

Plunkett's mother often said, 'Anything else you please, James, but no wet feet, I beg.'"

It was difficult to find suitable answers to such remarks, but Mrs. Plunkett did not require answers; she was like a cuckoo clock, once pull the weight down and she went perfectly by herself.

Marion looked regretfully after her pretty red branch, but she said nothing, and Mrs. Plunkett continued to relate anecdotes of people who had died from the consequences of wet feet, till a few more turns in the 'path brought them to the back of a neat-looking house and garden.

"Pray walk in," said Mrs. Plunkett, throwing open the gate. And in a minute or two more, Adrienne, good-humouredly helpless in the hands of the fussy little woman, found herself sitting without her boots in a wicker arm-chair beside the nursery fire. A beautiful nursery it was—a real honest nursery, where it would seem impossible for children to be anything but healthy and happy; beautiful, not from any special luxury of furniture, but by its exquisite cleanliness. The white boarded floor was as spotless as scrubbing could make it; the brass knobs of the fireplace glittered in the

sunlight; the window-panes could not have been more brilliantly transparent.

Two little children in white pinafores were playing with wooden bricks on the floor. Marion, perched on a chair on the other side of the fireplace, stretched out two little blue-stockinged feet to the blaze; and while Nurse took the boots down-stairs, the clean fat baby was transferred to Adrienne's lap.

Finding that Adrienne was fond of children, Mrs. Plunkett grew confidential over the sayings and doings of her own four; and then suddenly interrupting herself in the midst of a description of little Johnnie's appearance when he had the measles, she exclaimed in a tone, half-curious, half-confidential:

"But your cousins, Miss Blair! Have they left you alone already? I *should* have thought they would have liked to show you the place. Ah, it's very sad to see children lead such lives."

"Yes," said Adrienne, trying to disengage her hair from the convulsive grasp with which Master Baby had seized upon one of the coils, "it is almost the same as though they had neither father nor mother, poor little things."

"It is their own fault, I assure you; entirely their own fault. For shame, baby! is that the way you treat ladies who are kind enough to nurse you, sir? Mr. Plunkett and I were prepared to take every interest in them," she continued, bending over Adrienne, and helping to extricate her hair from baby's fat, rosy fingers. "We were away for our summer trip when Murtagh and Winnie first arrived. Poor little Marion was the only one we had then, and we were very near losing her that same summer. You would never suppose, would you, that she's nearly four years older than any of these; she's such a little mite to look at. When we came back, we found that that poor foolish Mrs. Donegan had already done a great deal of harm. There now, Master Baby, keep your hands to yourself, sir.

"The two children were making themselves ill with pining, and she encouraging them, and letting them do every mortal thing they liked under the pretence that they must be amused. My husband saw at once that it was his duty to remonstrate; he was quite shocked to see the way things were going. And I'm sure it was enough to shock any one to see those two

children, with their heads cropped after the fever, and their wizened yellow faces, and their little sticks of arms; they were enough to frighten one. I assure you I scarcely liked to look much at them just at that time.

"They had suffered so terribly from fever that Mr. Launcelot insisted upon their having what he called perfect rest. He would not even allow them to have a governess. He said that their brains were too active, and that the thing he most desired to hear of them was that they were growing as ignorant as the village children. Some people certainly have queer fancies, and he, of all people in the world, so clever as he is! Well, I hope he's satisfied now.

"But my husband was determined to do his duty by them. He spoke sharply to Mrs. Donegan about her behaviour, and there were most unpleasant scenes between them. She came down here one evening and said the most dreadful things. She told me myself, Miss Blair, that he ought to be ashamed to be so hard on poor little fatherless, motherless children, who were pining for a bit of love. I remember her expression quite well; I was quite upset after she went away. But my husband never minds those things. He does his duty, and he

doesn't mind what anybody says. He spoke to Murtagh himself next day, and told him how sinful it was to give way like that to every fanciful feeling that came over him,—one minute pining and miserable, and the next rampaging like wild animals all about everywhere, not minding a word anybody said to them. But it was all no use: Murtagh wouldn't answer a word, and from that day to this they've just gone on growing worse and worse.

"My husband has tried severity with them; but Mr. Blair doesn't like to hear of their being punished, and James hesitates to take the responsibility entirely upon himself. If they were his own children he'd soon bring them to order. But why should he hesitate to take the responsibility? that is what I ask him. He manages all Mr. Launcelot's business matters the same as he does Mr. Blair's. Mr. Launcelot trusts him just as much as Mr. Blair does, and he gave him full authority to do whatever he thought needful for them.

"He worries himself about those children ten times as much as he's ever had occasion to worry about his own. Why, their governesses alone have given him more

trouble than all his own servants put together, and it isn't a bit of use, as I'm always telling him. What's the good of worrying about other people's children? They are not one bit grateful. I really believe, Miss Blair, that they hate him; I believe those children hate every one; there's never been one day's peace since they've been here."

Exhausted by her own vehemence, Mrs. Plunkett paused to take breath, and Marion, profiting by the opportunity, said in a slow gentle way that seemed years older than her little self: "I don't think they hate me, mother."

"What do you know about it, child?" asked Mrs. Plunkett.

"Because," said Marion, raising her eyes from the fire to her mother's face, "I looked at them in church, and a butterfly flew in, and went on the side of Murtagh's nose, and I laughed, and he laughed too, quite kind."

Adrienne could not help smiling at the earnest half-pleading tone in which the child spoke, but Mrs. Plunkett said: "Nonsense, Maimy, you don't know anything about it! No; I don't believe there's any one in

this world they care one bit about, except it is little Frankie."

As Mrs. Plunkett enunciated for the second time her disbelief in the children's powers of affection, some one called from down-stairs, "Marion! Maimy!"

"It's father!" exclaimed the child, springing off her chair. "Back already! Yes, father, I'm coming. Nurse, my slippers please, quick!"

But nurse had gone down-stairs to fetch the dried boots, and while Marion went to the cupboard to find her own slippers, a firm regular step quickly ascended the staircase, and Mr. Plunkett entered the nursery, holding in his hand the very branch of roseberries which had brought about all the wet feet.

Adrienne had been surprised at the voice in which Marion's name had been called; it was scarcely to be recognized as belonging to the stern man she had seen that morning. But she was still more surprised to see the soft beaming welcome that broke out over little Marion's face as her father entered the room.

She was sitting on the floor, putting on her slippers, one little blue leg stretched out, the other doubled up to enable her to button her shoe-strap. She did not jump

up to kiss her father, but she turned her face up towards him, with a sweet glad look in her eyes.

"Are you going to have dinner with us after all, Fardie?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied, looking down with a smile at the upturned face. "I'm going to dine here to-day. I shall go to the farms to-morrow instead. See," he continued, holding out towards her the branch of roseberries, "I've brought you something pretty. It was lying in the middle of the path, and I thought it would please you."

"Why, it's my own branch! How could you know it was just what I wanted?"

The shoe was fastened by this time, so she got up from the floor, holding the branch of roseberries in one hand, and slipped the other hand into her father's. Then he perceived Adrienne. A few polite sentences were interchanged; the boots were brought; baby was given into Nurse's arms; and Adrienne, wishing them all "Good morning," walked back along the avenue, her pretty golden head as full as it would hold of thoughts about all these new people.

She was destined to have further lights on the

subject of her little cousins' behaviour, however, that morning.

As she approached the house she found that the hall-door was shut, and passing round to the back in order to find another entrance, she ventured to open what seemed to her like a kitchen door. It was not the door of the kitchen. She found herself on the threshold of a large, airy room, littered all over with clothes in various stages of washing, drying, and ironing. Mrs. Donegan, with her sleeves tucked up, was busy ironing print frocks at a large table near the fire; and at the sound of the door opening she exclaimed:

"Do, for goodness' sake, shut that door, Kate. Why ever don't you stop in the kitchen and attend to your dinner?"

"It's not Kate," said Adrienne; "I came round this way because the hall-door was shut. May I come in?"

Mrs. Donegan looked up, and grew quite red with confusion as she discerned her mistake.

"Oh, Ma'am, I beg your pardon!" she exclaimed, setting down her iron and coming forward to meet Adrienne. "I'm sure I never thought to see you here,

and the laundry in such a mess too; of a Friday there is so much to do. Walk in, Ma'am, if you please."

"Please don't let me disturb you," said Adrienne, as she shut the door. "Can I get through to the house this way?"

"Yes, Ma'am," replied Mrs. Donegan, taking up her iron again, "it's always through here or through the kitchen the children come."

"Have they come back yet?" asked Adrienne.

"Lord, no, Ma'am! they were in the kitchen with me this morning, getting some bits of griddle-cake to go off with somewhere, an' if they're back to dinner it's as much as they'll be."

"You can't tell me where to find them, can you?" suggested Adrienne.

"Tell you where to find them!" exclaimed Mrs. Donegan, pushing her spectacles up on her forehead, and pausing in her work to look at Adrienne. "It's plain you don't know much about their ways yet, Ma'am. Maybe it's up the mountains they are, or maybe up the river, or maybe across the fields, five miles away by this time. But wherever it is, ye might look for them a month o' Sundays, and never find them if ye're

wanting them; and so sure as ye're not wanting them they'll turn up fast enough, bless their hearts!"

"They live out of doors a great deal, don't they?" asked Adrienne, smiling at Mrs. Donegan's description of their proceedings.

"God bless you, yes, Ma'am. They'd never be confined with stoppin' in a house, but out and about, no matter what weather it is. They're a bit wild like, but they're the best-hearted children ever lived. But won't you sit down, Ma'am," added Mrs. Donegan, interrupting herself to set a chair near the table.

"If I stay may I help you?" asked Adrienne, attracted to the free-spoken old woman, and very willing to stay and talk to her. "I can *tuyauter* these frills. I don't know what that word is in English."

She took up a pair of gaufreing tongs as she spoke, and Mrs. Donegan looked amused at the notion of her help.

"Sure you don't know anything about such work, an' it's not so easy as it looks. But you may try if you like, Miss," she added good-humouredly, dropping the more formal "Ma'am," and from that time forth adopting Adrienne as one of the children of the house.

Adrienne, all unconscious of the greatness of the concession Mrs. Donegan had made in allowing her to touch her linen, laid her hat on one side, and in another minute was sitting gaufreing pillow-case frills in so business-like a manner that Mrs. Donegan, looking on critically, exclaimed after a minute or two:

"Upon my word, Miss, you do it better than I do it myself."

Adrienne laughed, and Mrs. Donegan, going back to her work, returned to the current of her thoughts.

"I could tell you more about those children than anybody else that's here," she continued. "But whatever you do, Miss, don't you go to believe anything Mr. Plunkett says about them. It's not the like of him can understand these children. Wasn't I here in the nursery in old Mrs. Blair's time, and nursemaid to Mr. Launcelot himself? I know what Master Launce was when his mother died, and I know what sort his children's come out of. And they're Mr. Launcelot's children to the very backbone; that they are, Miss, as you'll see when you come to know them better. Master Harry was always quieter, but you're not much like him, Miss,

except when you laugh you have a look of him about the eyes, I think."

Mrs. Donegan liked to talk, but she liked to talk after her own fashion, so before Adrienne could hear anything about the children she had to listen to a panegyric upon their father, which wound up with an account of how he married Mrs. Launcelot, who was "very nice for the matter of that; a Catholic too she is, just like your own mother, Miss, and a perfect lady, Mr. Launcelot wouldn't have married none other, but a little, gentle, delicate bit of a thing, who had a French maid to look after her, and let the children do whatever they pleased."

Then, and not till then, Adrienne was told that Mr. and Mrs. Launcelot had been in India now nearly seven years, and how Winnie and Murtagh had been sent home four years ago. "And Mr. Launcelot wrote me a letter with his own hand," added Donnie, "asking me to take care of his two little orphans till he came himself to fetch them; and he told me to 'mother them, when they were lonely, the way I'd mothered him long ago when he needed it.' Those were his very words. Many an' many a time I've read the letter. And when I saw the poor little things drooping and

pining, I used to think o' the night, thirty-two years ago now come Michaelmas, when the poor missis died, an' I crep' into the nursery after the old nurse was asleep, an' Master Launce was sobbing in his bed; and when I tried to comfort him like, he knelt up in his little nightgown an' put his two arms round about my neck,—and, 'Oh, Biddy,' says he, 'what *shall* I do now?'" Donnie's tears were running down at the remembrance.

"And he laid his head upon my shoulder, and he was that tired out with crying that after a bit he fell asleep kneeling up against me there; an' I carried him away into my own bed, and kept him warm till the morning. And then," she continued, indignantly sniffing away her tears, "tell me I don't know what I'm doing with his children. Deed, faith, I know a deal better than them as tells me such nonsense."

"They were very lonely when they first came, were they not?" said Adrienne, remembering Murtagh's words of the evening before.

"Deed they were! poor little lambs, sick and lonely enough; they scarce cared to do anything like, and I never could get them off my mind. Then after a bit, when the summer came, they used to go off whole

days up the mountains; and when I saw that pleased them I used to give them their dinner to take with them, and then they took to rampaging about, and I began to grow easier, bless their hearts! For there's nothing like it, take my word for it, Miss.

"When Miss Rose and Master Bobbo were sent over after with the baby—Miss Ellie that is—they were every bit as yellow and skinny like as Master Murtagh and Miss Winnie; and where would you see finer, heartier-looking children now than the four of them? I'm not for cossetting children too much. Give 'em plenty of good fresh air, and plenty o' good food, and let 'em alone, that's what I say. Stuff o' rubbish, confining them an' regulatin' 'em! Time enough for that by-an'-by when they go to school."

"But don't you think," said Adrienne, looking up with a smile, "that now they have had the fresh air and the food they might have just a little learning too, without doing them any harm?"

"Well," replied Donnie, with the air of one willing to make concessions, "I don't say but what they might have a governess, and let them do a bit of learning every day. But when they first came Mr.

Launcelot said they wasn't to be allowed to see a book at all, but running about wild in the good mountain air; and quite right he was too. And since then they begged so hard not to have a governess in the house, that Mr. Blair giv' in to them, and got them governesses from Ballyboden.

"But what with one thing and another they never stay. One says it's too far to come every day, and another says she can't manage the children, an' the last went away close upon three months ago because Mr. Murtagh slipped a handful of hailstones down her back. But, Lord! it doesn't signify; they weren't any good, when they did come; they hadn't got the wit to teach these children.

"They tell me there'll be a real clever German governess got next year, when the young gentlemen go to school. But it don't make much matter one way or the other. If they never got a governess at all, there's no fear but what Mr. Launcelot's children would be plenty clever enough. They may be a bit wild-like, but if they've got the good blood in them, they'll never go far wrong. I'm old, an' I've seen a lot o' people one way or another, backwards and forwards in the world, an' I

tell you, Miss, you may always let the good blood have its way; it's only the half-an'-half folks take such a deal o' looking after.

"Then, it isn't every one can understand that, and that's where the trouble is. With these children, now, ye can manage them with a crick o' your little finger, if you take them the right way. They'd give you the coat off o' their backs and the bit out o' their mouths if they thought you wanted it. But they won't be driven; it isn't a bit of use talking about it. There's nothing but gentleness is a bit o' good with them, and that's where it is them and Mr. Plunkett is such enemies."

Such were Donnie's opinions, and she descanted upon them at length, till Kate came to say that she thought it was no use waiting any longer for the children, and she had sent up Miss Blair's luncheon to the dining-room.

Mr. Blair did not take luncheon, so Adrienne sat alone at the head of the big table. She spent her afternoon alone, too, and had plenty of leisure to decide that Murtagh was right; the drawing-room was a musty-smelling old room. She opened the windows

wide, and filled the old china bowls and vases with flowers, and pushed the furniture about till the room looked more habitable. Then she unpacked her needle-work and her music, and tried to occupy herself; but finally, she was very glad when at half-past five Brown came to inform her that six o'clock was the dinner hour—an intimation which she took as a respectful hint that in Brown's opinion it was now time for her to dress.

CHAPTER IV.

THE children meanwhile had completely forgotten the existence of their new cousin. After leaving the kitchen they raced along with their spoil towards the river. The morning was deliciously bright; there was a fresh scent in the air that made them all feel inclined to caper about without exactly knowing why. Even Murtagh forgot his troubles with Mr. Plunkett, and raced and shouted with the others.

Their river was a branch of a broad mountain stream, but now at the end of the dry season the water did not come down with a steady rolling current as in the winter. It came trickling, sparkling, dancing between the great bits of moss-grown rock that strewed its course, finding for itself thousands of little channels, tumbling unex-

pectedly from time to time head over heels down the side of a big stone, and then lying still and clear in pools sheltered by the rocks. Only in the very middle was there anything like a real current, and there the water flowed swiftly along in uneven ripples, slapping up against obtrusive rocks with a ruffle of white spray that made the delight of the children.

But what was not a delight in that river? There was simply no end to its resources. There was the water to splash and paddle in, with stones for those who liked to practise hardening their feet, and patches of sand where one could enjoy that delicious half-tickling sensation of feet sinking and sand oozing up between all one's toes; then there were the pools for sailing boats; and the current in the middle for floating hats, with all the fun of not being quite sure whether they could be caught in time.

And the rocks covered over with thick sunny moss that seemed to grow on purpose for warming cold feet, and all the wonderful things that were to be found in the river,—things that came floating down, things that grew, and things that had got there somehow. Then there were the islands; the river's course was dotted

with them. And then there were the trout and the minnows.

It was to one of the islands that the children were going now. Notwithstanding the heavy rain of the preceding afternoon the night had been fine, and when the children got down upon the beach they found their beloved river a little fuller perhaps and rather more energetic in its twirls and dashes, but just as bright and as tempting as it always was on these lovely autumn mornings. The water looked like clear brown crystal in the sunlight, and soon everything was forgotten in the excitement of looking for trout. It was one of their favourite occupations; but not a fish did they see this morning, till, just as they were crossing the stepping-stones to a little island, Winnie pulled Murtagh's jacket, and pointed silently to where a great fellow lay under a rock, the sun shining on his spotted side.

"Golly loo!" whispered Murtagh, "isn't he a beauty?"

They stood a minute watching, but the trout scarcely moved.

"I say, how still he keeps," whispered Winnie; "I believe I could catch him in my hands."

In a minute she had set her saucepan down on the stone, had pulled off her shoes and stockings, and was cautiously stepping into the water. The icy cold of it made her screw up her eyes, but on she went trying to make as little splash as possible. Still the trout never moved. Murtagh's interest was intense; he could scarcely refrain from giving vent to his excitement in a shout. Winnie could hardly believe her own good fortune. She got close up behind the trout; she bent down; her hands were just closing on it, when,—there was a tremendous splash behind her, and in an instant the trout had whisked far away out of sight. She closed her hands with a convulsive grasp at its tail, but it was no use,—it was clean gone.

Even Winnie's equanimity was upset by such a disappointment.

"You little idiot, Murtagh! you *might* have waited till I'd caught him," she said, angrily.

"I beg your pardon awfully, Winnie," said Murtagh, who with both legs up to the knees in water was sitting upon the rock a picture of abject penitence; "I'm dreadfully sorry. I didn't do it on purpose. I was watching you, and I didn't see I was come to the edge of the stone."

"Who said you did it on purpose?" replied Winnie unappeased. "You might have looked where you were going."

"I'm awfully sorry," repeated Murtagh.

But Winnie didn't feel as if she could forgive him yet. She turned away in silence, and occupied herself with rescuing from the water her boots and stockings, which had of course been kicked off the stone when Murtagh slipped.

By the time she had done that, she had recovered herself a little; and presently, having fished out the garters, she turned round again and said with something very like a twinkle in her eye:

"As you threw it in you may fetch it out."

She pointed as she spoke to where the saucepan lay on the bottom of the pool. Murtagh having employed himself in taking off his wet boots and stockings, hooked it out cleverly with his foot; then Winnie slung boots and stockings and saucepan all on a garter round her neck, and tucking up her frock said quite cheerily:

"Never mind; come along, and let's see if we can't catch him somewhere else."

Just at that moment a shout arose from the other side

of the island, and Bobbo, bursting through the bushes, exclaimed in breathless delight that Rosie had caught a trout "in her hands in the water." Winnie told her of her disappointment.

"What's up with the trout, I wonder?" said Bobbo. "Generally they're off like lightning if you so much as look at them. By the Holy Poker, there's another!" he added, suddenly beginning to strip off his shoes and stockings, while Murtagh practically suggested that some one had been throwing lime into the water.

But Winnie's sharp eyes saw the trout as soon as Bobbo, and she had the start of him, being already in the water; so, signing to the others to be quiet, she advanced cautiously up stream till she got close behind it, Bobbo pausing meanwhile with one boot in his hand to watch her success. Then, bending down, she quickly clasped her little brown hands under the trout, and with a successful jerk threw it high and dry on to a sunny bit of rock.

"Hurrah!" shouted Murtagh. "She's got it. Come along, Bobbo; off with your other boot, and let's go up the river and try for some more."

"What shall we do with Ellie?" asked Rose.

"There's no beach a little higher up where the river gets narrower, and she'll never be able to jump from one rock to another."

The children were far too much excited to pay great attention to such a trifle.

"Oh, she must manage somehow!" said Winnie. "Come along. Pull off your boots and socks, Ellie, there's a good child, and don't be afraid of the water, it won't hurt you."

Ellie looked very doubtfully at her feet, and then at the water, as if she did not at all like the prospect; however, Rosie didn't wait for her to make objections, but, pulling off the little boots, lifted her down into the stream, and then waded off herself after the others.

Ellie had her own ideas of duty, and knew what was expected of her when she was out with people bigger and stronger than herself; so after one shuddering exclamation of dismay as her feet first touched the water, she tried bravely to do as the others did.

But she found it very hard work. The water was bitterly cold, and where it was only deep enough to come a few inches above the other children's ankles it was already nearly up to her knees. She saw that the others

twisted up their frocks, so she tried to twist hers up too, but she could only get up one little bit at a time, and the rest dabbled against her legs. Soon the hem was all wet, and her petticoats were wet, and the frills of her little white knickerbockers were wet. She was cold all over. The pebbles at the bottom hurt her feet. And then she didn't seem to get along one bit.

For a while she held tight on to the bit of frock that she was lifting up so boldly in front, and tried to encourage herself from time to time by saying half-aloud, "Ellie can walk in the river too, Ellie can;" but the big blue eyes often filled with tears, and her little stock of heroism began soon to melt away.

At last there came a bend in the river; the water grew deeper; and Ellie, getting into a place where there was a slight current, was very nearly taken off her legs. She saved herself by catching at a rock, but when she looked up to call one of the others to help her she found that they were out of sight.

That was more than she could bear. She was all lost now, and she never would be able to get out of the river any more, and it was no good trying to be brave, so she gave it all up, and sobbing out, "Oh, me is so told! me

is so told!" she laid her head down on the rock and began to cry at the very tip top of her voice.

The others meanwhile had completely forgotten her. The fish were, as Murtagh thought, stupefied with lime, but not so stupefied as to be incapable of trying to save themselves from pursuing hands. The chase after them raised the children's spirits to the highest pitch. The banks of the river were wild and more or less wooded. All civilisation might have been miles away.

Not a soul did the children pass, except one disconsolate-looking little girl sitting upon the bank. But, bare-legged and bare-armed, their hats hanging down upon their backs, their hair blown wildly about, with sparkling eyes and laughing faces, they splashed along in the bright cold water, or jumped from rock to rock to warm their feet, oblivious of everything in this world save the speckled trout for which they looked so eagerly in the clear brown pools by the rocks. Fortunately for Ellie, however, the thought of her flashed at last through Murtagh's mind.

"Why, Rosie," he exclaimed, "what's become of Ellie? she's not in sight."

The reflection caused some dismay for a moment

among the children; but Bobbo volunteered to go back and fetch her, so they comfortably concluded that it was all right, and troubled themselves no further. Back he went accordingly, and Ellie's loud-voiced grief soon guided him to the spot where she stood. But when he had got there, and comforted her, and rubbed her chilled legs warm again, and wrung the water out of her skirt, and rolled up her damp knickerbockers, he found that it was all very well, but she had had enough of trying to be heroic, and nothing would induce her to enter the water again.

It was a difficulty that he had not counted upon, but there was no getting over it,—coaxing and scolding were alike in vain. Good-natured as he was, he was not going to lose his share in the fishing; and moreover, he was accustomed to solve all difficulties in the readiest manner that came to hand; so, putting her on his back, he just waded to shore, and trotted along the bank till he overtook the other children. They could settle together what was to be done with her.

He found them in a state of wild excitement Winnie had that instant caught another fish, and Rosie, opening the skirt of her dress which she had gathered

up as a bag, displayed three shining trout caught by herself and Murtagh.

"That's five altogether!" shouted Murtagh. "And we're going up to Long Island, and we'll light a fire there and cook them. Rosie's got the cake and things tied up in her hat, so it's not a bit wet, and that'll be loads for our dinner."

"Oh, that will be glorious!" cried Bobbo. "But look here, I say, Myrrh, what'll we do with Ellie? she can't get along a bit in the water."

"Couldn't you take her through the woods?" suggested Rosie.

"And miss all the fishing on the way up!" replied Bobbo. "Thank you, I've missed enough of the fun already. I think it's your turn now."

"Oh, no, indeed it isn't," replied Rosie. "I have her all day long. It's only fair that you boys should have the trouble of her sometimes."

"It's always women who look after the babies," said Murtagh.

"Well, I'm not going to this time," said Rosie decidedly. "It really is too bad that our pleasure is always spoilt with having to think about that tiresome child."

Little Ellie's head began to droop on to Bobbo's shoulder, as she looked anxiously at the children's faces. She was somewhat oppressed by a sense of her own wickedness in refusing to go into the water again, and she felt that Rosie's reproach was not altogether undeserved. Still, though she was accustomed to be called tiresome, she did not like it; and besides, a terrible fear was arising in her mind that Rosie would make them leave her there alone. The question was perplexing. Whatever Ellie might think, the children knew that they couldn't leave her there alone; but then they really could not give up their delightful expedition, and they were none of them at all inclined to start off alone with her through the woods. What was to be done?

Suddenly a brilliant idea struck Winnie.

"That girl we saw sitting on the bank!" she exclaimed. "I think I know her; I think she comes out of one of our cottages. Let's get her to take Ellie through the woods. We'll give her some of our dinner when we get up to the island, and it'll be great fun for her."

No sooner suggested than agreed to, and springing lightly from rock to rock Winnie quickly disappeared in the direction she had pointed out.

CHAPTER V.

WITHOUT being put in the least out of breath by her rapid course she reached the spot, and finding the girl still sitting there plunged at once into conversation by saying:

"I think you live in one of our cottages, don't you? What's your name, please?"

But the answer, "Theresa Curran," was given in such a miserable voice that Winnie paused and looked at her with some attention.

The girl did not look up, but remained sitting with her elbows on her knees, and her face supported on her hands, staring in front of her as though Winnie were not there. Her face was tear-stained, her eyelids swollen with crying, and there was a look of despairing wretchedness in her face which made Winnie feel that she could

not go on with her message. So after standing beside her for a moment or two in silence she said: "Is there anything the matter?"

The girl did not answer, and Winnie repeated: "What's the matter?"

"I dunno what to do at all at all," replied the child drearily.

"Why?" said Winnie, "what has happened?"

Then, as though she couldn't keep it to herself any longer, the girl's grief burst forth in a passionate wail, and she sobbed out: "Oh, whatever will I do, whatever will I do? He'll kill me if I go home again."

"What is it?" said Winnie, somewhat awe-stricken. "What have you done? Who is it will kill you?"

"Oh, it's the rent!" sobbed the child, "and mother so sick and all, and he so savage at givin' it. He'll kill me; I know he will. He said he would;" and between fear and grief her words became too incoherent for Winnie to be able to understand.

"Have you lost it?" asked Winnie.

But the child's grief seemed too overpowering for her to give any answer; she only rocked herself back-

wards and forwards, sobbing as if her heart would break.

Winnie stood looking at her for a moment, not quite knowing what to do; then to her great relief Murtagh appeared at her side.

"What's the matter?" he whispered.

"I don't exactly know; somebody's going to kill her," returned Winnie. But Murtagh's presence made her feel as if she knew better what to do; so she climbed up on the bank, and knelt down beside the girl, saying:

"Look here, don't cry like that. Here's my brother, and there are some more of us down there, and we won't let anybody kill you. Besides, he wouldn't kill you really I don't expect."

"Yes, he will," replied the girl. "He always does what he says."

"But he can't," said Murtagh. "He'll be put in prison, and hanged himself if he does." The child sobbed on, giving no heed to Murtagh's words.

"What's he going to kill you for?" asked Murtagh, climbing up after Winnie.

"When I lost the goat he said he'd kill me next

time," replied the child. "Look here," she continued, rapidly unfastening her frock, and displaying her bare neck and shoulder. "That's what he did to me yesterday." Then burying her face in her hands she burst into tears again.

The little thin shoulder was covered with a great bruise all blue and red. Down the centre of it the skin was broken in a long zigzag crack; the rapid movement of throwing off her dress had caused the blood to ooze out, and Winnie and Murtagh stood transfixed with pity and horror as they saw the dark red drops trickle slowly down.

"Oh, Win," said Murtagh, "what can we do?"

Winnie, after standing perfectly still for a moment looking at the bruise, went to the bank, and leaning over tried to scoop up some water in her hat.

Rosie and Bobbo, seeing that something was the matter, came up.

"Just give me my hat full of water, will you?" said Winnie, "and have either of you got a pocket-handkerchief?"

"What's the matter?" inquired Rosie, filling Winnie's hat for her, and handing it up as she spoke.

Winnie didn't trouble herself to answer; and Rosie and Bobbo, climbing up the bank, stood silent when they saw the wound on Theresa's shoulder.

Winnie dipped the handkerchief in water and gently bathed the bruise.

"How horrible!" said Rosie, presently.

"Great, cowardly scoundrel," ejaculated Murtagh.

"That's nothing," said the girl, her grief beginning to subside a little under the influence of the children's earnest sympathy. "He nearly broke me all to pieces entirely, the day I lost the goat, and he said he'd kill me downright next time. Oh! and then there's mother!" she added, her tears bursting forth again. "Whatever will she do? and I daren't go back. I know it's with that great stick he'll kill me, and I can't bear to be killed; I can't bear it."

"Don't cry," said Murtagh. "You shan't be killed. We'll protect her; won't we?" he added, turning confidently to the others.

"That we will," said Winnie. "Why, you live on our land, don't you? So we're bound to protect you even if we didn't want to."

"Yez won't be able," replied the girl. "Ye don't

know what he is at all when he's angry. He'd kill every one of you if ye came between us."

"What an awful man!" ejaculated Rosie, in a tone of horror.

"I don't care if he does," said Murtagh, "you'll just see if we can't prevent him touching you."

"Because you don't know," said Winnie eagerly. "We're bound up in a tribe, and we always settled we'd protect everybody against people who wanted to prevent them being free; and then, you live on our land; that makes you one of the followers of our tribe, and you'll just see if we let him touch you."

"How can yez help it?" said the girl, half-incredulous, but in spite of herself half-convinced.

"Oh!" began Winnie, confidently. And there she stopped, not having as yet the slightest idea of how they were going to "help it." She consulted the others with her eyes, but confronted with the practical difficulty, no one was able immediately to propose a plan.

"Ye don't know what he's like," said Theresa, the momentary flash of hope dying out of her white face.

"Who is he?" asked Rose. "Is he your father?"

"It's my step-father, and mother had such work to get the rent from him. And now we'll be turned out all the same, an' he'll be that mad he won't know what he's doing. And it'll just break mother's heart, an' finish her off altogether, so it will! Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! whatever will I do?"

The children looked at her in silence for a little while, then Rosie asked: "Have you lost the rent?"

"Yes, down there," she answered raising her head. "I was jumpin' over the stones goin' across to the little house to pay it, an' I'd got the two sovereigns in my hand when my foot slipped, and they flew out of my hand into the water before ever I knew they were gone at all. Just in the very middle, where the water's runnin' fast, and it swept them clean away."

"I'll tell you what!" exclaimed Murtagh, who had been thinking deeply, "we'll take her up to the island and hide her there; then afterwards we'll manage."

"Yes! yes!" cried Winnie; "of course, that's the plan. How stupid of me not to think of that! Come along; let's go up at once for fear he might come and catch her here. No one 'll be able to touch you there,"

she added, turning to Theresa; "it's beautifully hidden, you'll see. And we can take you up provisions every day, and keep you as long as ever we like. Oh, Murtagh, what a splendid idea!"

"Spiffing!" exclaimed Bobbo. "Come along; let us be moving up. We've got a jolly lot of fish here," he explained to Theresa, "and we'll all have dinner together."

The children were so charmed with the notion that Theresa could not help being cheered. She still demurred, wondering what would become of her sick mother; but the children overbore her objections, and in a few minutes they were all going up the river's bank together.

The fish which had before been so absorbing were now completely forgotten in the interest of hearing about Theresa's life. Questions innumerable did the children ask; and Theresa, unused to sympathy, poured out willingly all her woes. It was a common enough story, but to the children it seemed almost too terrible to be true; her mother too sick to work, her step-father drinking nearly all he earned, and leaving them often for days at a time without food or money. To be

hungry, cold, and beaten, such was her daily life. "And there's mother just dying away," she added; "I heard Mrs. O'Toole saying she'd never last out the winter."

But the kindness and the confident promises of help with which the children heard her story so cheered Theresa that before long she began almost to enjoy talking over her troubles, and was even ready to laugh at one or two sallies of Murtagh's wit.

After a time the immediate bank of the river became impassable. Theresa and Ellie then struck across the woods together, Ellie prattling about everything she saw, and Theresa quite absorbed by her little charge. The others returned to the bed of the river. Bobbo, who had had scarcely any fishing, suddenly caught sight of another trout; the interest in the day's amusement was renewed; and so it came about that by the time they all met together again at Long Island not one of the whole party gave a thought to anything in the world but the fun of being on a desert island, and of getting their own dinner ready.

CHAPTER VI.

Long Island was one of the largest of the little islands round which the river flowed. The river at this part was more considerable. In the winter-time it was too deep to be crossed except in a boat, and even now, at the end of the dry season, it required some care and no little agility to ford it on foot. The island was so thickly overgrown with trees and bushes that from the river banks it seemed to be only an impenetrable mass of foliage. But the children knew better. In the centre of the trees and evergreens was a little cleared spot, and on that little clearance their father had, many years ago, built a hut.

The difficulty of approach, and the delightful loneliness of the place, formed a great attraction for the children; but the charm of charms was this hut.

Completely hidden as it was, approachable only by two little narrow openings in the bushes, never entered by a creature except the children themselves, there was a delicious mystery about it that heightened the pleasures of possession; and then, it was their very own, built by their father when he was a child like them, and begged for them by him from their uncle who was scarcely even aware of its existence. It was their castle, their territory, to do with absolutely as they pleased.

To grown-up eyes their castle was one of the very queerest, most tumble-down little huts that ever was built, but there was no place in the world where the children more enjoyed playing. There was only one room. Its walls were built of stones of all shapes and sizes, more or less firmly cemented together with mud; a square opening on one side served as a window; but in the doorway there were still the remains of a door, which Murtagh and Bobbo had mended so that it could shut and be fastened on the inside.

On the side opposite to the window there was a chimney, and in one of the walls there was a kind of cupboard where Rosie and Winnie kept a wooden bowl

four or five broken plates, two cups, and an old knife. Besides these things they had a good-sized empty box, that they used as a table, and five flower-pots that served as chairs; also a piece of soap, an old scrubbing-brush, a lot of raw potatoes, and a broom which they had made for themselves.

The only drawback of it all was that this island was too far off. There was a shorter way by the road, but the children always came along the river-bed, and though the distance was really far less than they imagined, the high wooded banks, the desolate fields through which the river wound, made the course of it so lonely that they always felt as if they were on an expedition into the depths of a wild country.

This very seclusion, however, made it all the more suitable to their present purpose, and to-day their sense of proprietorship was perhaps more delightful than it had ever been before.

For the moment, however, the grand and important matter was to get dinner ready, and without delay they set to work to collect wood for the fire.

Then the hut had to be cleaned, for it was more than a month since they had last been here, and cobwebs and

dust abounded; so while Rosie prepared to light the fire the boys went with the bowl and saucepan to bring up water from the river, Winnie swept out the hut, and to Theresa was entrusted the business of getting the fish ready for cooking. Ellie was sent to pick laurel leaves to strew the floor. "For," remarked Murtagh, "to-day's a grand festival day, and our floor must be strewed with rushes like the ancient Britons. I'll be lord of the castle, and, Winnie, you shall be lady."

"I don't know what to do with this fire, Murtagh!" exclaimed Rose. "The three matches we had left are every one of them damp; I can't strike them."

"What a sell if we can't have a fire at all!" ejaculated Bobbo. "What's to be done?"

"Go down to the mill, of course, and get some matches from one of the men," dictated Winnie, in her bright decided way.

"Well done, my lady Winifreda! right as usual," exclaimed Murtagh. "Be off, you varlet!" he continued in a grandiloquent tone of voice, turning to Bobbo, "and ——" He paused a moment to find proper words, but fine language running short the end of his sentence collapsed miserably into: "Look sharp back again."

"Bring a dictionary next time," laughed Bobbo, as he started off to fetch the matches.

"I say, Win, supposing we were to be Lord and Lady Macbeth," suggested Murtagh, "and the others might be ancient Britons we've taken prisoners."

"Thank you!" retorted Winnie indignantly. "I'd rather not. And besides, Myrrh,"—this more doubtfully —"I don't *think* Macbeth was alive when the ancient Britons were."

"Yes, he was, somewhere about that time," replied Murtagh, decidedly. "Don't you remember in the theatre all the people called each other 'thou' and 'thy;' and besides, of course, I know he was. Don't you remember Bruce and Wallace, and King Alfred the Great, and Hengist and Horsa, and all those chaps?"

"Yes," said Winnie, "so I do, of course. Oh, well, I suppose it's all right; anyhow, it doesn't matter."

"I don't believe it's right," said Rosie, "because Macbeth was a Scotchman, and the ancient Britons were ancient Britons, so they couldn't have lived together."

"That's rubbish!" decided Murtagh; "because how do you know Macbeth wasn't a Scot and Pict? and every one knows they were with the ancient Britons."

"I don't think we'd better play games like that," replied Rosie, who had no answer ready, "because, you see, we have to do all the cooking and cleaning ourselves. We'd better be poor people living in a hut."

Rosie's plan was decided to be as good as another, and then scrubbing, sweeping, and dusting went on vigorously, till Bobbo came back from the mill bringing with him not only a whole box of matches but also a can of buttermilk, which the good-natured miller's wife had given him.

How the children enjoyed that cleaning! How they rubbed, and scrubbed, and splashed the water about! They forgot all about being hungry in the interest of sweeping, and dusting, and arranging. Any one might have supposed that they were the most orderly little mortals in existence.

Even Ellie had her share. With the skirt of her frock pinned back, and her little sleeves rolled up, she knelt upon the floor arranging laurel leaves, with the shiny sides uppermost, as though her very life depended on the completeness of the operation.

At last all began to look a little more clean and tidy,

as Rose and Winnie observed with pride. The fire was lighted, the potatoes were boiling, the fish ready to cook, and now arose the great question: "How were the fish to be cooked?" The children had often seen Donnie cooking fish, but then it was always in a frying-pan, and they had no frying-pan. Murtagh was equal to the occasion. He thought he had heard somewhere that down at Killarney trout used to be grilled over a wood fire on a kind of gridiron of arbutus twigs; and there was a splendid arbutus tree on the island.

"All right," said Winnie; "I daresay it's as good a plan as another; anyhow, let's try."

The boys went out to cut the twigs, and she prepared a little wall of stones on either side of the fire, so that the sticks might be laid across from one to the other, and support the fish nicely over the red mass of glowing wood, without letting them get burned. Rosie and Theresa laid out upon the table the cracked cups and plates, the brown cake Donnie had given them, and Bobbo's can of buttermilk. Everything was ready except the trout. The children began to realise how hungry they were; and the boys coming quickly back with their bundles of rods, every one gathered round

the fire, absorbed in the interest of watching the experiment of fish grilling.

Winnie's plan for making the gridiron answered perfectly, and in a minute or two six trout lay sputtering and fizzing side by side upon it.

"My golly goskins! doesn't it make one hungry to look at them?" cried Bobbo in delight.

Rosie looked almost solemn; she appealed anxiously to Winnie to know how long she thought they ought to take cooking.

"I don't know exactly," said Winnie. "We must just guess!" And so well did they guess that when, after what seemed a very long time, the six trout were all served up together in the flat wooden bowl, decorated by Murtagh with sprays of arbutus leaves and berries, the children decided that they had never in all their lives sat down to such a jolly dinner.

They were as hungry as hungry could be, and tired enough to be glad to sit down. The fish and brown cake were delicious; the hut was most cosy with its carpet of green leaves and its blazing fire, and even Theresa could not help being gay and light-hearted.

By the time dinner was over, however, the short

October afternoon was beginning to grow dark, reminding them that, even taking the shortest way home by the road, they had some little distance to go, and nothing had yet been quite settled about Theresa.

"Now listen, and I'll tell you what my plan is," said Murtagh, in answer to a question from Rosie. "This hut is a very nice place to live, and I vote Theresa stays here. There are three fish left, and a bit of cake. That'll do for her supper and breakfast. We can collect a lot of wood now before we go; then she can fasten the door inside and keep herself warm with having a jolly big fire all night; not a soul will ever know she's here, and to-morrow——"

"Well, but, Murtagh," interrupted Rosie, "we can't—!"

"Stop a minute, till you hear the end," said Murtagh, "I thought all about it on the way up here. To-morrow we must just make up our minds to ask old Plunkett something. It's not very nice," he added, deprecatingly, turning to Winnie, "but then, you know, it's not the same as if it was for ourselves. We'll just tell him all about it; how the rent was lost, and all; and then, though he is such a—what he is,—of course

he'll let them off paying after an accident like that. And then, Theresa, we'll all go home with you when you go, and your mother'll be so awfully glad to see you, after thinking you're lost, that she won't think a word about anything except kissing and that sort of thing; and of course when the rent's all right your step-father won't touch you."

"What a splendid plan!" cried Winnie and Bobbo together, as Murtagh, proud of the completeness of his project, looked round for admiration. There was a reality and importance in the idea of keeping her all night that pleased them greatly.

The notion was by no means so agreeable to Theresa; but at the thought of going home the terror of her step-father came over her again. She dared not face him without the rent, the remembrance of her last beating was too fresh in her mind.

"I think I'd better drown myself and have done with it!" she exclaimed, relapsing into her former state of despair.

"What in the world should you drown yourself for?" asked Winnie. "You have nothing to do except to stay here quite quietly and comfortably till to-morrow

morning; then we'll come up with the rent, and we'll all go home to your house together: the night goes quite quickly, you know, when you're asleep."

Winnie's words made the affair seem certainly much simpler. It was an easy way of getting the rent, and Theresa felt ashamed of her ingratitude.

"I'm sure I ask yer pardon, every one of ye. It's much too good ye are to me," she replied warmly. Then with a sudden doubt: "Ye're sure ye'll bring it up in the morning?"

"Oh, yes!" cried Bobbo and Winnie together, "of course we'll come up the very first thing after we've got it," said Murtagh. "You know he won't actually give us two sovereigns, but he'll say you needn't pay your rent; that's just the same thing, you understand."

"But," suggested Rosie, who understood better what Theresa meant, "supposing he won't let them off paying."

"Oh, of course he'll let them off!" returned the others confidently.

"Why," said Winnie, "just think, what's two sovereigns in all the hundreds and hundreds of pounds of rent he has paid to him!"

"Why," added Murtagh, "he has more hundreds of pounds every year, I expect, than we have halfpennies, all five of us put together."

"So it would be just the same," continued Winnie, "as if some one asked us to give two halfpennies between us, and we would have to be pretty mean if we wouldn't do that."

"Yes," said Rosie, who never could understand anything the least bit like a sum, "then I think it'll be all right. He couldn't possibly refuse that."

"I should rather think not!" answered Bobbo, while Winnie, jumping up, said they must set to work at once to collect firewood.

"There's only one thing more," said Murtagh, whose first satisfaction with his own plan was a little bit damped by seeing that Theresa was not so enchanted as he had expected. "About your mother, Theresa, is that what you're thinking about? Are you afraid she'll be frightened at you not going home?"

"Oh, Murtagh, we can't help that!" said Winnie. "We must keep it all secret, or half the fun will be gone!"

Theresa replied dolefully that "she didn't know

what her mother would do at all at all. She thought maybe it would kill her, she was that weak."

"I'm sure it won't kill her," said Bobbo, "and just think how jolly it'll be to see her face when we take you back to-morrow."

"If once we let out the secret of the hut we'll never have any peace here again," urged Winnie.

"Now do just listen to me," said Murtagh, suddenly illuminated by another brilliant idea. "Nobody's going to let out the secret of the hut. This is what I vote. Of course we can't tell your mother all about you, Theresa, because it would never do to let anybody know where you are; but we might write something on a piece of paper, just to let her know you're safe, and poke it under the cottage door the way the Fenians do their warnings about shooting people. We can do it on the way home when it's too dark for any one to see us."

"Oh, Murtagh!" cried Bobbo in delight. "How ever do things get into your head?"

Murtagh tried not to look too proud of himself, but he began to feel really elated at his own genius for arranging details.

"Who's got a pencil?" he continued, producing a bit of dirty paper from his pocket.

None of them possessed such a thing; but a stick blackened in the fire and then dipped in buttermilk answered fairly well for a pen. It was found dreadfully difficult to write with; so Rose, who was the best scribe of the party, was directed to write only these words: "Theresa is safe"—that being the very shortest message they could think of. Then Murtagh put the letter in his pocket, and they all set to work to collect firewood.

Poor Theresa was secretly terrified at the prospect of spending the night alone upon that out-of-the-way little island, but she dared not speak. The only alternative was to go home, and she was still more terrified when she thought of what awaited her there. There was nothing for it but to bear her miserable fortune as best she could. While the children made their preparations for departure she sat cowering by the fire, and to tell the truth her unhappy face tried their patience not a little. They had no conception of the nervous terrors she was undergoing, and they thought that she really might look a little happier when they had arranged such a beautiful plan for setting everything right.

Before they went, however, Murtagh asked her good-naturedly what was the matter, so she had at least the satisfaction of expressing her fears. The children tried to console and reassure her, but they could not succeed; and at last, feeling that they were only wasting words, they bade her "Good night," and picked their way across the river.

Left alone, Theresa dared not move even to bolt the door which the children had closed behind them, but turning the skirt of her dress over her head, she sank down in the corner of the hut with her face to the wall, and quivering with fear lay still and listened.

Nothing came. Not a sound was to be heard but the murmuring of the water as it rippled swiftly over the stones, and before long the perfect stillness of her position produced its own effect; she fell into a short troubled sleep. But her dreams were of terrible things, and she awoke suddenly a few hours later convinced that she had heard something, she was too agitated to attempt to define what. She gave one scream, and then sitting up she held her breath and listened. A gentle wind had arisen, the branches of the trees were swaying backwards and forwards, and she imagined she heard

a sound as of ghostly footsteps. The sound continued, but nothing approached; and at last, a desperate kind of curiosity overmastering every other emotion, Theresa determined to go to the window-opening and peep out.

Trembling greatly she crept across the hut. The moon was up now, and the first object that met her eyes was a great white shimmering thing that seemed to be coming towards her, waving its arms as it approached. She stood still a moment transfixed with fright; then a gust of wind rushed through the trees; the whole island seemed to shiver; two long white arms were raised as if to seize her, and she could bear it no longer. Shrieking at the top of her voice she fled blindly, she scarcely knew where, out of the hut down to the river's edge. The sight of the shining water recalled her just sufficiently to her senses to prevent her from attempting to cross the river; but still screaming she turned and rushed—right into the arms of the ghost itself, where she fell exhausted and terrified among the straggling branches of a tall laurel.

For a moment she lay shuddering with closed eyes; but presently, venturing to look around her, she found

that the ghost had vanished; that the moon was shining peaceably on the white backs of the laurel leaves as they fluttered on the swaying branches; and, after the first moment of astonishment, she began to understand that all her fright had been caused by nothing more nor less than a big bush.

Poor little Theresa! She had sense enough left to feel very small and very much ashamed of herself, so picking herself up from the ground she went quietly into the hut. This time she barricaded the window and bolted the door, then blowing the fire into a blaze she eat some supper, and lying down once more fell soon into a peaceable slumber.

The children meanwhile, on leaving her, had trotted in the deepening gloom along the road till they came to the Daly's cottage, a mere mud cabin standing back in a little garden from the roadside. But alas for Murtagh's plan of poking his bit of paper under the door! The door was wide open, and opposite to it, near the fire, a man stood smoking.

"What's to be done now?" whispered Rose. "We'd better go away; he'll see us."

"Hold your tongue," returned Murtagh. "He

can't see us because we're out in the dark, but he'll hear us if you don't mind."

Rose was silenced, and Murtagh stood a minute thinking what was best to do.

"We'll hide in the ditch," whispered Winnie. "You wrap it round a stone, then shy it straight in and hide; don't run away."

Murtagh nodded in sign of approval; and while he looked for a stone the four others concealed themselves in the ditch. Standing a little on one side of the door he flung in his note. The children saw the little white thing fall at the man's feet. He started, looked round, then stooped and picked it up. As he opened it they heard him say something in a low thick voice. Then there was a shrill cry of "Peter, what is it?" He seemed to answer; took a great stick from the chimney corner, came to the door, and looked out. They heard the woman's voice say, "Oh, Peter, catch the villains!" and their hearts began to beat a little faster as they looked at his great stick.

To their intense relief, however, after a moment of apparent irresolution, he exclaimed with a drunken laugh, "May old Nick fly away with 'em. I'm well rid

of her." Then the door was shut to with a bang, and they all crept out of their hiding-places and scampered away home as fast as their legs would carry them, not feeling quite sure he wasn't after them till they were safe inside the house.

They rushed helter-skelter along the passages like a whirlwind, setting the doors banging behind them, till at the drawing-room door they were brought to a full stop by Adrienne, who hearing the noise came out to meet them.

"How late you are!" she said. "Are you not very cold? Come in here and warm yourselves while they are getting your tea ready."

The drawing-room behind was bright with lamp and firelight. In her white dress, her face a little flushed with bending over the fire, she seemed to the children almost like a being descended from some other world. Murtagh looked doubtfully at his muddy boots before he followed her into the drawing-room. The room smelt of flowers, a low chair was drawn up to the fire, and on a small table beside it was a bit of needlework and a china bowl full of ivy and late roses. The "mustiness" of the old

drawing-room had somehow disappeared as if by enchantment.

Adrienne knelt down upon the hearth-rug, and taking Ellie's two little hands in hers she rubbed them up and down to bring back the heat.

"Where have you been?" she asked. "It's very late; you must be tired and hungry."

"Don't!" burst out Murtagh, who was apparently fascinated by the contrast between Ellie's dirty little fingers and the hands in which they lay. "They are so beastly fishy; you'd better let them alone. Ellie can warm them herself at the fire."

"Ellie is so tired," said Ellie plaintively, leaning her little body against Adrienne. Adrienne sat down on the floor and took the child into her lap.

"Poor little thing!" she said, looking up at the others. "Have you been fishing? I think you have been rather too far for her."

"I should rather think we have been fishing," replied Bobbo, enthusiastically. "And we found something else besides fish; didn't we, Myrrh?"

An admonitory kick from Winnie, accompanied by a *sotto voce* "Hold your tongue, little donkey," warned

him to be quiet, and Rosie hastily covered his abrupt silence by remarking: "We caught nine trout, and four of them were the very biggest I have ever seen."

Adrienne was all attention and interest, and without mentioning Theresa the children had plenty to tell. It was new to them to have a kind and intelligent listener waiting at home when they came in full of their adventures, and they thoroughly appreciated the advantage. Lolling in easy chairs by the fire, they were so warm and comfortable that they paid no attention to Peggy's announcement that tea was ready, and presently Mr. Blair's step was heard coming along the hall. Then Adrienne looked up quickly, and said with a little hesitation:

"Hadn't you better go and take your tea now? I think that is Uncle Blair, and you are so—— You are not quite dressed for the drawing-room."

The children started out of their chairs. Murtagh contented himself with one of his queer, significant glances, embracing the whole group that stood upon the hearth-rug. Rosie blushed, and explained that, "When we were with mamma we always dressed for the evening."

Adrienne, without answering, led sleepy little Ellie to the door. She was simply anxious to get them out of the room, judging rightly that their uncle would not be at all enchanted to find such a dirty little tribe in possession of all the easy-chairs. The children were quick to understand, and they did not require to be told twice. They vanished promptly through one door as their uncle entered by the other.

The school-room was cold, and as untidy as usual. The door was standing open, and the flame of the candle which lighted the tea-table flickered in the draught. As they surveyed it, and heard in the distance the drawing-room door shut behind them, the children had a vague shut-out sort of feeling.

"What a set of dirty vagabonds we do look," said Murtagh, shivering. "Shut the door, Bobbo; the candle's running down one side on to the table-cloth."

CHAPTER VII.

NEXT morning breakfast was half-finished when Brown entered the dining-room, and said that Mr. Plunkett was in the study, and wished to know if he could see Mr. Blair.

"Ask him to come in here, Brown," said Mr. Blair.

"Take a cup of tea, and tell me your business now, Plunkett," he said, as Mr. Plunkett was ushered in. "I have promised Mr. Dalrymple to be with him at ten to look at his moss agates, so I have not a moment to give you after breakfast."

"And I shall be gone to the outlying farms by the time you come back," returned Mr. Plunkett, without seating himself. "Well, sir, a most unpleasant event has occurred, and as I think you will be called upon to

institute some inquiry, I consider it my duty to inform you of it without delay. Peter Daly has just been with me."

The children were suddenly startled into attention, and made violent attempts to look as though they didn't care.

"And it appears, from his confused account, that yesterday morning his step-daughter, Theresa Curran, aged thirteen, was sent to my house with the amount due for half a year's rent, two sovereigns, which she was to pay to me. The money was not paid yesterday, and the girl, it seems, has disappeared. Her mother became anxious yesterday afternoon, and despatched a little boy to make inquiries in the village. The girl had not been seen, and what gives the affair a serious aspect is this."

Here Mr. Plunkett, tucking his umbrella under his arm, drew out a pocket-book, and began to search among the papers contained in it. Then selecting one he laid it before Mr. Blair, and continued:

"Yesterday evening, after dark, this paper was mysteriously thrown into the cottage, and though, as you perceive, it is meant to be of a reassuring character,

it points in my opinion to the conclusion that the girl has been forcibly abducted for the sake of the money in her possession."

Murtagh held his breath, and sat most unnaturally still for fear of betraying himself as he recognised his piece of paper. What in the world, he wondered, was the meaning of a "reassuring character"? Rosie blushed so violently that it was lucky for them no one was paying attention to their movements.

"You will observe," Mr. Plunkett went on, "that the writer is evidently a person of very little education; out of those three words two are wrongly spelt." Winnie's eyes sparkled with suppressed laughter, and she glanced at Rose as Mr. Plunkett made this remark.

"And," said Adrienne, who had risen, and was looking over her uncle's shoulder, "it has not even been written with a pen and ink."

The children began to lose all command of their countenances. They longed to be out of the room, but a sort of fascination kept them silent in their chairs. It did not occur to one of them that the simplest thing to do was to tell their story, and ask for the rent then and there.

"Everything, in fact," replied Mr. Plunkett, "tends to demonstrate that the offence has been perpetrated by members of the lowest class of society, and this invests the affair with a certain gravity. But I permit myself to hope that it may yet prove less serious than at first sight it appears."

"Go down to the cottage, Plunkett, if you have time before starting for the farms, and I should not be at all surprised if you find her sitting quietly by the fire," said Mr. Blair. "My countrymen have a wonderful aptitude for all that savours of romance."

"I have been down, sir," said Mr. Plunkett, with something that was almost a smile, "and I fear the fact is incontestable that the girl and the rent have disappeared. The romance is not wanting. Mrs. Daly has got it into her head that a man, Patrick Foy by name, who has a grudge against her for marrying Daly, has killed the girl, and sent this letter in order to hinder any search being made till he has had time to leave the country."

Adrienne's eyes opened wide with mixed astonishment and incredulity.

"It is quite possible, Miss Blair," said Mr. Plunkett.

"The folly and passion of these people is beyond all reasonable comprehension. I do not say that in this case I consider such a solution to be probable. But you perceive," he continued, turning to Mr. Blair, "that since the woman expresses such an opinion it complicates the affair, and renders it doubly advisable to put the matter at once into the hands of the police."

A sort of gasp from Bobbo made Mr. Plunkett turn his head; but Mr. Blair, suddenly remembering the moss agates, pushed out his chair at the moment, and recalled Mr. Plunkett's attention by saying with a smile:

"Well, well, Plunkett, you know I am one with you in your crusade against these barbarians; do whatever is necessary. And if it turns out to be serious," he added more gravely, "don't let any question of expense weigh with you. The poor girl must be found."

"I shall institute proceedings at once," replied Mr. Plunkett, as he walked with Mr. Blair to the door; "and if there is evidence to confirm the mother's notion we will, of course, have Pat Foy taken up."

The two gentlemen walked away down the passage, and the children were at last able to escape.

"I say," exclaimed Bobbo, "here's a pretty go!"

"Hadn't we better say where she is at once?" said Rose anxiously; "somehow policemen——"

"You'd better look out, Rose," said Murtagh mockingly; "you'll be taken up before you know where you are and clapped into prison. You're the eldest of us, you know."

But though Murtagh could not resist the temptation to laugh at Rose, he was serious enough when he turned to Winnie and asked:

"What's to be done now? How shall we ask him for the rent?"

Winnie thought deeply for a minute or two; then she burst out ecstatically with: "Oh, Murtagh, wouldn't it be fun to keep her hidden, and have all the policemen and people searching, and Mr. Plunkett fidgeting and worrying, and taking ever so much trouble! It would pay him out so jolly, and pay out that policeman too for telling about me and Bobbo."

"No, no, Murtagh!" cried Rosie, "that would never do. We'll be getting into an awful scrape."

"I don't think Theresa would think it much fun, Win," said Murtagh, shaking his head. "No; I think we'd better get the rent. The thing is—— I say!" he

exclaimed, suddenly breaking off in the middle of his sentence, "isn't that old Plunkett himself on Black Shandy?"

He pointed as he spoke to the avenue, where some one on a black horse was trotting away from the house.

"It is so," replied Bobbo. "He's off to the farms now, and the Lord knows when he'll be back!"

It was useless to run after him, he was already much too far off; what was to be done? The children looked blankly at one another. Then Rose exclaimed vehemently: "Why didn't you ask him before he went, Murtagh? It was all your plan, and now what shall we do?"

"Ask him this evening instead," replied Winnie coolly, while Murtagh looked troubled. "Never mind, Myrrh, it'll all come right in the end, because things always do. As we can't ask him now the first thing we had better do is just to get something from Donnie that will do for Theresa's dinner, and then go up and tell her."

"Poor Theresa!" said Murtagh, "she'll be awfully disappointed."

Still Winnie was right. It was evidently the first thing to do; and having provided themselves with

various scraps from the larder they started for the island. They went by the road; they had no heart to go up the river; and as they walked along they earnestly discussed the possibilities and probabilities of the police finding out all about it before to-morrow; for it had become evident that they must keep Theresa another night. It was more than ever impossible now for her to go home without the rent, and there was no knowing at what time Mr. Plunkett would return from the farms.

They decided that they would wait about in the avenue to way-lay him as he came back, and thus lose no time in making their request; but he was not likely to return till eight or nine o'clock, and it would be too late then to go up to Theresa. If it had not been for the police they would have thought very little of keeping her a night longer, but their notions about what policemen might know and do were very vague, and they had in their secret hearts hazy visions of prison and a court of justice, which were too unpleasant to be talked about even to one another.

"I wish we'd never had anything to do with her," sighed Rose.

"No," said Murtagh; "because you know, if she

hadn't met us perhaps she'd have gone home and been killed; so, of course, it's better this way."

"Yes, but supposing we don't get the rent!" suggested Rose, dolefully.

"Oh, we must get that. Nobody could refuse it after thinking she's dead and everything. If they don't find out before to-morrow it will be all right."

"I wish to goodness to-morrow was come then!" ejaculated Bobbo, who remembered how very unpleasant the policeman's hand had felt on his shoulder that evening on the garden-gate.

In this gloomy frame of mind they reached the island. Theresa had recovered from her terrors of the night before, and now feared only her step-father.

When she heard the children's account of all that had happened she very nearly relapsed into the state of despair in which they had found her the day before. Rosie had secretly hoped that she would insist upon going home, but no such thought entered her mind. She only implored Murtagh to be sure and get the rent soon. "For, you know, sir, he'll be madder than ever now after having all this botheration, and he wouldn't mind what he did."

It was impossible to comfort her, and notwithstanding Winnie's and Murtagh's confident assurances that everything would be settled on the morrow, the little party that dined on the island that day was very dreary and dismal.

The children stayed as long as they could to keep poor Theresa company, but towards four o'clock they thought it best to go and begin their watch for Mr. Plunkett; it was just possible that he might come home early.

"You mustn't expect us early to-morrow, Theresa," said Winnie; "on Sunday morning we can't get out before breakfast, because Donnie always comes and pomatums all our heads. Then we're dressed for church; then there's church; then there's dinner—oh dear! I wish Sunday didn't come so often; we shan't be able to get up till the afternoon."

"Mornin' or evenin' it don't matter; I don't believe yez'll ever be able to get the rent," replied Theresa, disconsolately; and in that desponding condition they were obliged to leave her.

They wandered about down in the park, listening anxiously for the sound of Black Shandy's hoofs. The

wind was very cold, and towards six o'clock the evening closed in dark and wet. Their teeth chattered and their clothes were soon soaked with rain. Still it was no use going home till they had seen Mr. Plunkett. Theresa must not be disappointed a second time; so they marched patiently backwards and forwards to keep themselves as warm as might be, and held on bravely to their purpose.

At last there was a sound of footsteps. The children ran eagerly forward in the hope that it might be Mr. Plunkett for some reason returning on foot, but it turned out to be a labourer going home from his work.

"Whatever are ye doing out here in the rain?" he exclaimed in surprise.

"We're waiting for Mr. Plunkett," replied Murtagh; "we want to speak to him."

"Ye won't speak to him to-night then," returned the man. "He came home in the doctor's trap hours ago. Haven't ye heard the news?"

"What news?" exclaimed Murtagh.

"The news o' the shooting. He was shot at from out o' the little wood across at the back o' Dolan's fields,

an' he never was touched at all; only Black Shandy killed dead as a stone,—worse luck!"

The "worse luck" may have been meant as a lamentation for Black Shandy, but the tone in which it was uttered gave it an uncommonly different signification.

"Shot at!" exclaimed the children excitedly.

"What an awful lot of funny things are happening!" said Murtagh. "Who shot at him?"

"Them as thought we've had enough o' him and his ways, I s'pose," replied the man. "And that's not a few. Good-evening to yez; ye'd better be runnin' in out o' the rain."

"Yes, but look here," said Winnie. "Did they want to shoot him dead?"

"What d'ye suppose I know about it? Maybe it was only a bit o' fun, just to see whether they could hit a man or no when they tried," he replied, with a curious kind of laugh.

"Was he hurt? Were they caught?" inquired Bobbo.

"I don't know the rights of it, but there's nothing serious. Old Nick'll always take care of his own. He fell

down with the horse, and they took him up an' carried him into the farm; then the doctor was sent for, and after a bit the two o' them drove back here together. That's all I know about it. It's up at the house ye'll hear the whole story. But my old woman 'll be looking out for me. Good-night to yez." And this time he moved off quickly.

"Isn't it lucky he wasn't killed!" said Rosie. "We'd never have been able to get the rent then."

"I wonder why they always shoot people," said Winnie. "Last year when Mr. Dalrymple was in Italy they shot Mr. Williams, and now they've tried to shoot old Plunkett."

"Because they're agents," replied Murtagh promptly. "And I don't exactly know what agents are, but it's something very bad. They're tyrants, and they oppress everybody. That man that was fishing with me and Pat O'Toole said Ireland would never be free till all the agents were killed."

"Are you quite *sure* old Plunkett's an agent?" asked Bobbo with interest.

"Quite sure," replied Murtagh, "because they said so; and besides, can't we see he is ourselves? Isn't he always oppressing people?"

"Why doesn't the Queen banish them all out of Ireland?" said Winnie. "That's what I'd do if I were her."

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Bobbo, laughing, "wouldn't it be a jolly lark if she banished old Plunkett?"

"Yes; but, Murtagh," said Rosie, who generally kept one idea at a time steadily before her mind, "how are we going to get the rent? It's all very fine talking, but we never seem to get one bit nearer to it."

"And we're not likely to get a bit nearer to it to-night," said Murtagh with a sigh. "We've just got to wait till to-morrow morning. It's no use thinking about it. Here goes, Winnie; I'll race you to the house."

But though he made the best of it he was greatly disheartened, and so too was Winnie. The plan had seemed so splendid at first, and now that it was to be carried out everything went wrong. They might pretend not to think of it; in reality it occupied all their thoughts, and when the house was reached they went very silently off to their own rooms. Bobbo and Rosie soon followed with Ellie, and while they groped their way into drier clothes the remarks exchanged across the

little landing that separated the two rooms were of a decidedly doleful description.

They had some idea of staying up in their rooms till the dinner-bell rang; they did not feel in the mood to meet people and be asked questions about what they had been doing. But they had neither fires nor candles; they were cold and uncomfortable; and Murtagh soon remarked that he thought it was awful stuff staying up there in the cold.

"What's the good of it? We've often been in a row before, and, after all, people can't guess just by looking at us that we know where Theresa is."

"All right then," said Rosie; "let's go down. But don't let us seem to be cold or anything. Let's look quite jolly, as if nothing had happened." And she ran down-stairs as she spoke, gaily talking and laughing.

The other children admired her plan but they did not second it, and it was a very cold, hungry, dispirited-looking set of little people who in another minute stood outside the school-room door.

"I hope to goodness the fire's not out," said Murtagh, as he groped for the handle.

He opened the door as he spoke, and disclosed to

the children's somewhat astonished eyes a school-room looking so different from their ordinary place of refuge that it was hardly to be recognised. Not only was a bright fire blazing in the grate, but the whole room was in perfect order. The crimson window-curtains were drawn; the tea table was decorated with a bouquet of fresh flowers; the books had got into the bookcases; the music into the music-stand; the more comfortable and respectable of the arm-chairs were disposed within reach of the fire; the brown moreen sofa had been dragged from its corner to occupy the place of honour at one end of the hearth-rug; and Nessa herself, in her pretty evening dress, was sitting on the sofa reading.

An undefined sensation of comfort crept over the children, but with it the elder ones had an unpleasant consciousness that somehow their wildness seemed suddenly out of place. They didn't feel quite as if they were in their own school-room, and they hesitated an instant in the doorway, wondering half-uncomfortably what Nessa would say to them. They were very quickly at their ease, however, for she looked up brightly as they entered, and exclaimed:

"Oh, there you are! I am so glad. I was expect-

ing the dinner-bell to ring every minute, and I wanted to be here when you arrived. What do you think of it?" She looked round the room as she spoke. "Peggy and I have been working the whole afternoon."

"Awfully jolly!" said Murtagh, taking up a position on the hearth-rug, and surveying the room with a satisfied expression.

"How pretty you have made it look!" said Rosie. "What did you do to it?"

"What did we not do?" said Nessa. "Peggy scrubbed and brushed and polished, and I dusted and arranged, and pushed the furniture about. First I was going to settle it a little by myself, and then Mrs. Donegan came up and she sent Peggy to help me."

"Well, I call this very jolly," said Winnie, who had thrown herself into a chair, and was looking round with a beaming countenance. "Doesn't it seem to you just a little bit like when we were at home, Murtagh?"

"Yes," said Murtagh, slowly. "Only it isn't papa, you know."

"That reminds me," said Nessa, as she rang the bell for tea. "Who are Cousin Jane and Emma, or Emily and Frankie? because I saw Uncle Blair for a minute

at lunch time, and he said they were coming to stay here."

"Frankie coming!" exclaimed the children in delight.

"Oh, I am so glad!" continued Winnie. "He is such a dear little fellow, only he is so delicate; he is as old as Murtagh, really, but you wouldn't think he is more than seven or eight years old, and he's not a bit strong. Often we have to carry him just like Ellie; two of us put our hands together, you know."

"He's just the very best little fellow that ever was born," said Murtagh, warmly. "Now he really is good, if you like. I don't know how he manages; he never even wants to do anything—I mean things he oughtn't to. I suppose he was just born so."

"I wish he was coming alone," said Bobbo.

"Why?" asked Nessa.

"Oh!" replied Murtagh, "because Emma's a prig, and Cousin Jane—well, Cousin Jane *is* a nuisance. Isn't she now, Rosie?"

"Oh, yes," replied Rosie. "You know she laughs at us; and then about our clothes too, she always teases us because we're so funnily dressed, and that isn't our

fault. Donnie and Mrs. Plunkett settle all about that, and I'm sure I don't like being dressed as we are one bit; I often feel ashamed to go into church with all the funny colours we have to wear; and there's another thing, Emma hasn't half such pretty things as we used to have when we were with mamma!"

Rosie grew quite pink with indignation at the remembrance of what she had suffered by reason of Donnie's uneducated taste; and Nessa agreed that it was aggravating to have to wear clothes that one didn't like, and then be made fun of into the bargain.

"But tell me something," she continued; "are they all my cousins too?"

"Oh, yes," cried Winnie, "so they are! *Our* cousins; doesn't that sound nice?"

"What's funny," said Murtagh, "is about Cousin Jane. She's our cousin, and Emma and Frankie are our cousins too, because—Uncle William had a son. Oh, I never can remember that rigmarole; Rosie knows. Explain all about it, Rosie."

"You always begin wrong, Murtagh. That's why you can't remember," replied Rosie. "Uncle William was Uncle Blair's twin brother, and he's very, very

old, you know. Then Uncle William died and had a son."

"Had a son and died, you mean," cried Murtagh, "and the son married Cousin Jane, and had another son called 'little Frankie,' and then he died too, and——"

"That means Frankie died," interrupted Winnie; "you're as bad as Rosie, Murtagh!"

"Well, but I couldn't say it any other way," replied Murtagh. "If I said, then he died too and had a son called Frankie that would mean he had Frankie after he died. Perhaps he did; I'm sure I don't know; he's been dead a very long time, that's all I know about it, and Frankie's the very jolliest little son any one could ever have! When 's he coming?"

"I don't know," said Nessa; "not for some time I think. Uncle Blair said——" The dinner-bell ringing loudly, interrupted her sentence. "Uncle Blair said," she continued, rising, "that they were making a little sort of driving tour through the hills, and that they would end here."

"What a pity you have to go," said Rosie; "it is so nice talking."

"Would you like to come to the drawing-room after dinner?" said Nessa. "Uncle Blair does not come till nine o'clock."

"Don't you mind us coming?" asked Murtagh. "Emma always said we're such a nuisance!"

"Oh, no; indeed you are not to me!" replied Nessa, with an earnest warmth that made the children look up at her with pleased faces.

"When we've finished tea," said Rosie, as the door closed behind Nessa, "we might get some hot water and wash our hands and faces, don't you think, Murtagh?"

"All right!" said Murtagh, nodding his head.

And the result of their resolution was that when Nessa came out from dinner she found in the drawing-room four shiny little faces reflecting the lamplight, four tightly brushed heads, and four pairs of hands as beautifully clean as such weather-beaten little hands could be.

The children had, in fact, made themselves so clean that they felt half-ashamed, but Nessa appreciated their little attention.

"How nice you all look!" she said kindly, and

then she sat down amongst them, and they spent a very happy hour chatting round the fire. They discussed their cousins' visit, and Mr. Plunkett's escape, and the children had lots to tell about the place and the people. It was so nice talking, as Rosie said, and they were very happy to be thus possessed of Nessa's undivided attention. So when bed-time came they ran gaily enough up their little staircase, and as they separated on the landing Murtagh exclaimed:

"You were quite right, Win, things always do come right in the end; only to-morrow morning and all our troubles 'll be over!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MURTAGH woke next day with a glad feeling that something pleasant was to happen; and then, remembering what it was, he sprang out of bed with a shout of—"Hurrah, Bobbo, to-morrow has come, and we'll be all right now!" Careering across the landing in his night-shirt, he woke Rosie and Winnie in order to remind them of the same fact, and they all rejoiced together, planning what they would say to Theresa's mother, and anticipating with delight how "awfully" pleased she would look when she knew Theresa wasn't dead, and that the money was all right.

"I'm very glad we met her, after all," reflected Murtagh, as he returned to his own room to put on some garments more suitable to the breakfast-table. "Even if

gave them the news, "that he would be confined to the house for several days."

Nessa was astonished at the faces of dismay with which the children received the information.

"Are you sure?" Rosie ventured to ask. "Are you sure he won't be able to get out for several days?"

"Well, I really can't tell you that, Miss Rose," replied the doctor. "But he's not very bad,—not very bad." The doctor had a habit of laughing when he was nervous, and it made him very nervous to stand in the middle of the churchyard talking to Nessa, so he laughed a great deal as he answered Rosie.

"Giggling idiot!" muttered Murtagh, as he thrust his hands into his pockets and walked gloomily towards the carriage.

"Why can't he say something in earnest?" he added, turning as he thought to Winnie. But it was not Winnie; it was Nessa who was close behind him.

"Would you like to go round by the Red House, and inquire there how he is?" she suggested, feeling quite sorry for the children's needless anxiety.

Murtagh felt doubtful of the utility of that proceeding, but a nudge from Winnie, and an expressive glance

from Rosie, made him accept the proposal. Winnie had conceived the bold design of seeing Mr. Plunkett in his own house, and of asking him without more delay; but, arrived at the Red House, she found that her hopes were vain.

"Mr. Plunkett was in his own room," Mrs. Plunkett said, "and did not know when he expected to leave it."

"Mightn't we go up and see him?" suggested Winnie undauntedly, but Mrs. Plunkett answered in horror: "My dear Winnie, I wouldn't let one of you inside his room for anything in the world. Why, he won't even have one of his own children in except Marion, and she's more like a mouse than a child."

So the notion had to be given up, and they drove away feeling more than ever puzzled as to what was to be done. Poor Theresa! They scarcely dared to think of going up to her with the news that she must wait again, and this time wait till they did not know when.

Their heads were so full of Theresa's troubles that dinner was little short of torment to them. They could not eat; they were longing only for the meal to be finished in order that they might get away and consult together. What, therefore, was their confusion, when

towards the end of the second course Nessa innocently suggested that they should go together and pay a visit to the poor woman whose little girl had been lost.

"Uncle Blair said it would be kind of us," she said.

The children at first were so taken aback they scarcely knew what to say.

"We—we can't," replied Murtagh. "We have to go. I mean," he said, recovering himself, "we have something else to do."

"Look here, Murtagh, I don't see a bit of use all of us going," exclaimed Rosie, gaining a sort of desperate courage from Nessa's presence; "and I'm not, for one."

"Do you mean," exclaimed Murtagh, astonished, "that you're not coming up to——" He stopped short just in time, growing scarlet at the thought of how nearly he had betrayed himself.

Nessa looked at him in surprise, while Rosie answered stoutly: "No, I'm not."

"Couldn't your business wait till to-morrow?" Nessa asked gently.

"No," said Murtagh, with a sort of shutting of himself up that made further questions impossible.

There was a minute's silence; then Nessa turned to Rosie and asked whether she knew the way to Mrs. Daly's cottage, and whether it would be too far for Ellie to walk.

"I tell you what," said Winnie presently, a vague idea that perhaps 'something might turn up' at Mrs. Daly's prompting her suggestion, "if you'll wait for us at the cottage we'll come there after, because anyhow that's the way we'll come home. Rosie can go with you if she likes," she added, contemptuously.

So it was arranged; and dinner over, the children went away to their own rooms to prepare for their walk.

"What is to be done, Murtagh?" asked Rosie, as they mounted the little staircase. "Goodness knows when that stupid Mr. Plunkett will get well again! I think much the best plan is to give up the whole thing, and tell Mrs. Daly now all about Theresa. We can't possibly keep her there for ever and ever, and we shall be getting into an awful row, for the police always find things out."

"What is the good of talking like that, Rosie?" interrupted Winnie impatiently. "Just as if we didn't

know as well as you that we're getting into an awful row. You keep on telling us the same thing over and over again, as if that would help us out of it."

"Well, but I do tell you a way out of it," replied Rose.

"Yes, just like a sneaking woman's way," said Murtagh. "Of course, you're never to stick to any one when it gets to be any trouble sticking to them."

"Well, I'm sure I don't see much good sticking to people when you can't do any good by it," returned Rose, reddening; "and besides, you're sure to let it all out before long, with the kind of things you say before other people."

"Come now, Rosie, you're a great deal worse than Murtagh," remarked Bobbo, and a pitched battle of tongues was imminent, when Winnie again interrupted:

"Do hold your tongues, and let's settle what's to be done."

But talking about it was very little use, and soon Nessa's voice was heard at the bottom of the stairs calling out to know if Rosie and Ellie were ready.

Great indeed, as the children expected, was poor Theresa's trouble when she heard the news they

brought; it was impossible to console her. Nothing but the terror of going home, which grew in proportion with the efforts made to save her from that dreaded contingency, kept her upon the island. She suffered, really, infinitely more from the fears and loneliness of her captivity than she would have suffered even from her step-father's anger. Her position on the island was indeed almost insupportable; but a sort of unreasoning shrinking from any new action, and, in spite of her desponding assurances to the contrary, a blind faith that somehow the children would make things all right in the end, kept her where she was. The first night had been the great difficulty, and that over she would now stay as long as the children could keep her.

In answer to her tears the children could say nothing but promise more confidently than ever to make it all right somehow, if only she would wait patiently; and after they had done their little best to comfort her they went away promising to come up the very first thing before breakfast and bring with them news of her mother.

The thought that they were going to see her mother reconciled her somewhat to their departure, but the

hour they had spent with her had made them more than ever downspirited. They had exhausted all their courage in trying to comfort her, and the three little hearts were very heavy as they walked along the road that led to the cottage. It was Winnie as usual who brightened up a little at last.

"Never mind, Myrrh," she said, as they reached the cottage-door. "We'll do it somehow, you know, if we hold out long enough." And she seemed so sure that the boys felt surer too.

They stopped on the threshold, hesitating to enter; but Nessa's voice within, speaking to Rose, emboldened them to lift the latch. The cottage was much like many another, but bare and neglected-looking. It felt cold, like an uninhabited place. A mud floor; at one end a cupboard; at the other a bed; a table, a couple of broken chairs; and in the smoke-stained fireplace a newly-lit fire trying to burn: that was what the children saw. Rose, at the fire, was stirring something in a saucepan; Nessa was sitting beside the bed with her back turned to the door. There seemed at first to be no one else in the cottage except little Ellie, who was leaning against Nessa's knees; but as the children's eyes became

used to the obscurity they distinguished on the pillow the white wasted face of a sick woman.

Rosie looked up full of importance as they entered.

"There you are!" she exclaimed in a half-whisper. "Oh, it was such a good thing we came. Do you know she had nothing to eat, and there was no fire, and the door was open, and the pig had got in, and the chickens were pecking her oatmeal, and oh! everything was so miserably uncomfortable; but we've settled her bed, and now we're making some gruel."

Nessa looked round at the sound of their entry. Her face wore a saddened expression not usual to it.

"These are my little cousins," she said to Mrs. Daly; "but we did not know how ill you were when we agreed to come all together."

"They're very welcome, Ma'am," replied the poor woman with a trace of cordial hospitality still left in her faint voice. "Ye're kindly welcome, my dears; will yez please to sit down?"

"Thank you," said Murtagh, and they sat down at once round the fire. At home as they generally were in the cottages they scarcely knew what to do with themselves in this one, and were glad to subside into silence.

Nessa was hearing an account of the poor woman's illness, and from time to time the low indistinct sentences, interrupted by a constant cough, reached their ears.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" whispered Murtagh after a time.

"Oh, no," replied Rose. "We've done everything. We made the room tidy, and we lit the fire and everything, and there was scarcely any wood, and she has hardly any covering on her bed, and there isn't a single thing to eat except a little oatmeal and some scraps of hard bread."

"What's in the saucepan?" asked Winnie.

"Gruel," replied Rosie. "Nessa settled it. It's got to be stirred all the time, and then she's going to toast the scraps of bread when the fire gets a little brighter."

After that the children said very little; but, sitting round the fire, they employed themselves with poking bits of wood into the blaze, and listened at first almost mechanically to what Mrs. Daly was saying.

She was speaking of her husband now, telling how he was very good to her when he was sober, but that when he got a sup of drink, it was like mad it

made him. "He was as kind as a body could want yesterday morning," she said, "and went up to Mr. Plunkett's to tell about the child being gone an' all; but now I suppose it's in with some of his bad companions he is, for he's never been back since. And then, you see, Ma'am, it's not like as if Theresa was his own child. Of course, he hasn't the feelings like for her that a father might have, an' she makes him mad with her flighty ways, till what with the drink an' the anger he beats her sometimes till she can scarce stan' up on her legs.

"She lost the goat up on the mountains two months ago come Wednesday, an' deed he nearly murthered her entirely. She lay moanin' there on the straw all night fit to make your heart bleed. But for all that he's a very kind man; by nature I mean, Ma'am, you couldn't find a kinder. It's all for her good he thinks he's doing it, and with the drink——"

All this was said in detached sentences, interrupted often by a cough, or a few words from Nessa.

The children scarcely dared even to look at one another. They strained their ears to catch every word. Poor Theresa! it seemed to them that she might almost

as well live with a wild beast as with such a step-father. No wonder she was afraid to come home.

But talking exhausted Mrs. Daly, and Nessa came soon to the fire to see if the gruel were ready. Then the bread had to be toasted, and a cup and plate and spoon had to be found and washed. But Nessa might have done nothing all her life except prepare gruel and toast, so quickly and deftly was it all made ready, and in a very few minutes Mrs. Daly, propped up in her bed, was partaking of the most comfortable meal she had tasted for days.

Nessa would not let her speak any more, but in order that she might not feel hurried over her gruel began to talk herself, and amused the children as much as Mrs. Daly by an account of her journey from Brittany to Ballyboden.

She had such a perfectly simple way of talking, that, notwithstanding a certain Parisian bonnet which had been the object of Rosie's admiration all church time, she seemed no more out of place sitting on a broken chair, making conversation in poor Mrs. Daly's cabin, than she would have been in the most elegant of drawing-rooms. Mrs. Daly was cheered by the

pleasant chatter, and the children were quite sorry when the gruel was finished. But it was time to go home, and after asking if Mrs. Daly would like her to come again to-morrow Nessa took her leave.

As they passed out of the gate a man evidently the worse for drink rolled in, and staggering up the little path noisily entered the cottage.

Nessa turned quite white.

"Are you afraid?" asked Bobbo.

"I—I can't bear people who drink," she replied, recovering herself.

"Mustn't it be dreadful to live with him?" said Rosie, as they walked on.

No one answered her. The children were inclined to be very silent. This life of Theresa's seemed to them something that could not be true. They had often been in and out of cottages; they had often seen men tipsy in the village; but they had never realised before what it meant; and it came upon them to-day like a dreadful new thing they had just discovered.

"How kind you are!" said Rosie, gently coming close to Nessa, after they had walked about half a mile. "Mustn't Mrs. Daly be very glad we went?"

"Poor woman!" said Nessa, her eyes filling suddenly with tears. "She is very good. I wonder why God made us so happy."

"Yes," said Murtagh, who had been considering Rosie's words. "I think you're very kind; I think you like helping people."

"When I was little," replied Nessa, turning to him with a smile, and falling into the children's train of thought, "I had a nurse called Aimée. She used to be very unhappy because I could not go to her church, and on Sunday afternoons she always took me to try and help some one. She used to tell me that that was my way to heaven. Wasn't it a pretty thought?"

"I think you must have been quite a different little sort of girl from us," said Winnie. "We never thought about helping people, and those kind of things."

CHAPTER IX.

NESSA next morning expressed her wish to go and see Mrs. Daly again, and Rosie again volunteered to accompany her.

"What's the use of my going to the island?" she said in answer to the other children's reproaches afterwards. "I can't do Theresa a bit of good, and I hate going there. I hate to think of it. It makes me miserable. Soon the police 'll find out all about it; I know they will, and we'll just be put in prison."

She went away as she spoke; she didn't want to talk about the affair. She would like to have forgotten it if she could, and she kept close to Nessa all day in order to prevent the others from having an opportunity of reminding her of it.

Her gloomy view depressed the other children not

a little. They were already inclined to be low-spirited enough, and Rosie's conviction that the police would interfere before long affected them in spite of themselves, adding all the trouble of vague anxiety to their practical difficulties.

Winnie said, "she didn't believe ladies and gentlemen were ever put in prison, but she was not at all sure."

"Isn't it dreadful?" she said, waking up in the morning and thinking of it first thing. She meant by 'it' all their troubles.

"Yes," said Murtagh; "and all day long too; I can't manage to forget it at all, but we've just got to hold on, you know. We must be able to see old Plunkett soon now, and as for feeding her we can always manage that somehow. It's no use thinking about the police. If they're going to come why they'll have to come, that's all."

So they cheered each other as best they could till Winnie, suddenly brightening up, exclaimed: "Oh yes, Myrrh, and I'd nearly forgotten. I thought of such a good plan last night in bed; something for Theresa to do while she has to stay there. You know her mother's ill with compunction, or some name like

that, and she ought to be kept very warm; so I thought supposing Theresa made her some flannel jackets while she's up there. I know how to cut one out, and we can get the needles and thread and things out of Donnie's basket."

"Where are you going to get the flannel?" asked Murtagh laughing. "Because they'll be rather queer jackets if they're made of needles and thread."

"I've thought of that too," replied Winnie triumphantly. "Come along;" and she jumped up from the staircase where she was sitting and danced into the boys' room.

"We'll have two of your flannel shirts," she explained, as she went down on her knees before a great chest of drawers and began to pull at the handles of the linen drawer.

"Well done, Winnie, you are a brick; I never knew any one like you for thinking of things," exclaimed Murtagh heartily, helping her to get the drawer open. "Here, take these two new scarlet ones; they're the biggest; and besides, all the others are in rags. Now for the needles; you fetch them, and I'll run out with these for fear Donnie catches us.

Won't she be in a jolly wax when she finds out they're gone?"

"Oh, she'll never miss them," replied Winnie; "and besides, we're only taking them for a poor person, so of course it's all right."

Right or wrong the shirts were speedily conveyed to the hut; and, busy with her work, Theresa was happier when the children left her for the night than she had been since the day of their meeting.

Thus another day went by. In vain the children hung round the Red House; Mr. Plunkett did not appear. The end of their adventures began to seem very indistinct. Supposing that Mr. Plunkett would not give them the rent when they did ask him? What was to be done then? It was a thought they refused to entertain, but in spite of themselves it crept from time to time into their minds, and it helped with everything else to make them unhappy. Sometimes they felt half-tempted to confide their trouble to Nessa, whose gentle ways were winning for her a warm place in their hearts, but there was a something of untamed shyness in their nature that made them shrink from exposing their secrets to any one. So they kept their perplexities to themselves,

bearing them as best they could, and clinging still to the hope of getting the rent from Mr. Plunkett.

But the end of their adventure came upon them more suddenly than they expected.

On Wednesday morning they had for very idleness sauntered into the drawing-room where Nessa was engaged in rearranging the flowers, and, congregated round a little table by the window, they were watching her operations, when Donnie appeared in the door-way.

"I've brought you up the drop of soup I promised you, Miss Nessa, and a beautiful jelly it is," she exclaimed. "Ye might cut it with a knife. But the poor woman won't care much about jelly or soup this day, for it's all out about the child. The police have gone up now to search the place."

The words fell like a bomb among the children.

"What!" exclaimed Murtagh. Rosie flushed to the roots of her hair, and stooped to pick up some fallen leaves. Winnie, with two bright red spots in her cheeks, started from her seat, while Donnie, without waiting for any questions, continued:

"I sent Peggy to the village this morning, and

she's just come running back an' told me all about it. The miller from the mill up there by Armaghbaeg came down this mornin', and he'd never heard a word about it before at all. But directly he heard what all the people are saying he went straight off and gave his evidence at the police-office; how, last Friday night—the very day she was missing—he heard a most awful shrieking and screaming coming from somewhere about the island up there in the river. He and his wife heard it together. Most awful he says it was, an' made their blood run cold in the bed; and he said to his wife, 'Kitty,' says he, 'I'd better be going to see what it is;' and she laid her hand on him, an' says she, ''Deed an' you will not. If there's base people about you'd better stop an' take care o' them that belong to you.' So he stopped with her, and sure enough it must have been Theresa they heard. So one lot of the police are going to take up Pat Foy, and there's more going up to search in the island and thereabouts. Anyways, that's the story Peggy's brought back with her."

"But they haven't found Theresa, then!" exclaimed Winnie, catching at the hope.

"Found her!" echoed Mrs. Donegan, shaking her

head. "Poor child, it's little they'll ever find of her again! That's my belief."

"Oh, we must go out!" exclaimed Winnie, unable any longer to hide her excitement. "Come along." And before either Nessa or Donnie could ask them a question they were gone.

Too much excited to speak, they set off running quickly across the lawn and down the avenue. Once pausing for breath, Winnie said: "We shall get there first if they didn't start till Donnie told us!" But no one answered; they wanted all their breath for running.

They went down through the village, for the road was the shortest way. People were standing about in knots talking, but the children did not dare to ask if the police had started yet. As they passed the police-station they glanced hastily in, but naturally they saw nothing that could tell them whether they were or were not in time.

Bobbo felt his legs tremble as he thought that perhaps before evening he would be locked up there. He did not exactly know why it was such a dreadful thing to have hidden Theresa, but only felt that if the police found her something awful would happen to them.

Without being the least bit cowardly the prospect seemed to him very unpleasant.

"Oh, Murtagh!" he exclaimed, with tears starting to his eyes, but Murtagh answered without looking round: "Come on; let's keep together," and quickened his own pace as he spoke.

Bobbo swallowed his tears, and after that the four pairs of legs went steadily, patter, patter, along the road, and not another word was spoken.

At each turning they expected to see the police in front of them. They strained their eyes to catch the first glimpse through the hedges of those dreaded dark coats, imagining from Donnie's account that at least a regiment would be employed in the search. Every tree-trunk indistinctly seen made their hearts beat faster, but on they went—running when they could; sometimes forced to walk for want of breath.

Turn after turn was passed. No police yet. At last the island was in sight, and the ground lay clear between them and it.

"In time!" exclaimed Murtagh.

But they were not sure yet; they might be altogether too late, and find the island empty. The thought lent

wings to their feet. They dashed through the little wood that separated the river from the road, scrambled down the bank, crossed the river, and stood at last before the door of the hut. Theresa was there, sitting quietly working at the flannel jacket.

"Holy Virgin! what has happened?" she exclaimed at the sight of their excited faces. "Mr. Murtagh, Miss Winnie? What is it? Is me mother dead? Ah, tell me; will one of you tell me?"

But the relief of finding her safe was too great for words to be possible. Murtagh and Winnie stood trembling, while Rosie fairly burst into tears.

"Ah, what is it? Will one of you tell me?" implored Theresa, wringing her hands. "It's me mother; I know it is! Oh, whatever did I ever come up here for? Let me go to her!" And she started up to go.

Murtagh shook his head, and stretched out his hand to prevent her.

"Good God!" cried Theresa, passionately. "Can't one of ye speak? Miss Rose, tell me; what is it?" And Rose thus appealed to dried her tears, and found words to tell that the police would be up there in a few minutes.

Winnie recovered herself, and added: "So we mustn't stay here. Now then, Murtagh, wake up, and think what we are to do next."

Murtagh took up the wooden bowl that stood half-full of water upon the table and drank; then quite himself again, he said:

"Yes, the first thing to be done is to get away from here, down the river and through the woods into one of the shrubberies; we shan't meet any one that way."

On hearing that her mother was as well as usual Theresa was so relieved that she did not seem to think of anything else but gathering up her work. She followed Murtagh and Winnie without question or objection.

Though Murtagh had said they would meet no one this way they did not feel safe, and hurried along in silence. Murtagh and Winnie were turning over plans in their heads of what was next to be done.

Bobbo, ashamed of his momentary weakness, began to recover his usual faith in Murtagh. But Rosie could find no comfort anywhere. Tears rolled over her cheeks as she followed the others, and she could think of nothing but the court-house as she had once seen it, with a grave-

looking judge on the bench, policemen standing about, women crying, people staring and whispering. Only instead of the prisoner she had seen at the bar she imagined herself, and Murtagh, and Winnie, and Bobbo crowded in together, and her uncle and Nessa looking shocked, and Donnie talking about them. Then Mr. Plunkett would look so disagreeable, and Mrs. Plunkett too, and Cousin Jane would laugh at them, and perhaps they would be shut up in prison all their lives. One thing after another crowded into her mind, and the more she thought the more she cried. They must be found out some day soon.

"After all," said Bobbo, trying to feel brave in order to console her, "perhaps it isn't so bad. I expect Winnie and Murtagh will get us out of it somehow."

"They can't prevent the policemen taking us," returned Rose dolefully. "I wish to goodness we'd never had anything to do with it."

"Even if we did get put in prison I believe Murtagh would get us out somehow," said Bobbo, trying hard to feel really sure of it in his heart.

"Don't talk such nonsense!" replied Rose crossly,

"Murtagh's only a little boy." But she was somewhat consoled nevertheless, and by degrees stopped crying.

In the mean time they had left the river, and passing through a wood came now to the shrubbery where Winnie and Murtagh had arranged together that they might hide, and talk over plans, in a great Portuguese laurel.

The laurel was a very big one, trained into the shape of a pyramid, and there was plenty of room for the children to sit in the centre among the interlacing branches, completely hidden from outside by the close clustering leaves.

"Now," said Winnie, when they were all safely in, "have you thought of anything, Murtagh?"

"I don't exactly know," replied Murtagh slowly. "There's the mountains, but it would be awfully difficult to manage about her food. I don't see quite how we're to do it. Do you?"

"I won't do another single thing," interrupted Rose. "I told you long ago you ought to have told Mrs. Daly on Sunday. Then we'd never have got into all this dreadful scrape."

"Well, but, Rose," said Murtagh in a supernaturally

gentle voice that he sometimes used when Rosie seemed to him quite unreasonable, "you know we couldn't tell on Sunday when we hadn't got the rent. How could we? It would have been worse to let her go home then than on Friday when we found her first."

"I don't know anything about the rent," returned Rose. "All I know is, it would have been much better if you'd done what I said; then we'd never have been so miserable."

"Don't talk like a fool!" ejaculated Winnie impatiently, while Murtagh said:

"But don't you see, Rose, that would have been as bad as murder, if we'd let her be killed."

"I don't see anything," answered Rose. "I only think this is the most dreadful thing we ever had, and I wish to goodness *anything* would happen, I'm so wretched. And I think it's very silly of you and Winnie ever doing it. You're only little children, and if people are going to be killed children can't prevent it."

Here Rose began to cry again, and Murtagh turned to Winnie with a despairing—"What shall we do? It's so awfully difficult to settle. I keep on thinking of plans, but—— Oh, dear! when will that tiresome

Mr. Plunkett get well! Bobbo, did you go and ask about him this morning?"

"Yes; they said he was coming down-stairs this afternoon, but I asked when we'd be able to see him again, and Biddy only grinned, and said, 'Maybe a month o' Sundays, and maybe next week.'"

"Oh dear!" sighed Winnie again, really for once in her life at her wit's end. "What can we do? Can you say any plan, Murtagh?"

"The only thing we can do," said Rose, suddenly stopping her tears, "is just to take Theresa back to Mrs. Daly's now, and tell her all about it. I'm sure it's much the best plan. We haven't got anywhere to put Theresa. She can't stay here in the laurel all night. Soon Donnie'll be asking what we do with all the scraps she gives us, and I don't believe if we keep her here till doomsday that we'll ever get the money from Mr. Plunkett."

"Oh, Mr. Murtagh!" exclaimed Theresa piteously, "ye won't be sending me home now without the rent."

Murtagh gave no answer but a puzzled sigh, while Rose continued: "It's just every bit as unkind to Theresa keeping her here as it is to us. You can't do

her one scrap of good. You'll only make her step-father angrier and angrier when she goes home for every day you keep her here—and there isn't a bit of sense keeping her here ever so long when there's nothing to keep her for."

While Rose was speaking, Winnie, sitting on a low branch, stared up through the net-work of twigs at a bird's nest in the top of the trees, her whole attention seemingly absorbed by trying to throw laurel-berries into it. Only the impatient swinging movement of her feet told that she heard what Rose was saying.

As Murtagh was still silent Rose thought he was beginning to be convinced, and she continued in a gentler tone of voice:

"Don't you see, it really would be awfully silly of us if we went on keeping her here any more? It would take us years and years before we saved up two pounds out of our Saturday money, and we couldn't possibly hide her for years and years; now, could we? So what is the good of keeping her any longer! If her step-father is really going to beat her so dreadfully he'll only do it worse for her staying away. He daren't kill her. If he does we'll tell the police about him;

besides, I'm quite sure he won't. And then it is so dreadful hiding her. I'm quite certain the police will find out about it soon, and they'll come and take us and put us into prison, and perhaps it will be us will be killed." At the thought Rosie's tears began to flow again. "It is so dreadful going to prison. I can't bear it; and if we could get her back to Mrs. Daly's now, before the police find out anything, then it would be all right."

Theresa had listened intently to every word, and now with a white face and a wild resolute look in her eyes she stood up and said:

"I'm going home. Will ye let me pass, if ye please, Miss Rose?"

Rose eagerly stood on one side and held back the branches, but Winnie sprang from the seat and caught Theresa's dress, while Murtagh exclaimed:

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Theresa, "I'd 'rather go home. It don't matter what happens to the likes of me."

"It does matter," returned Murtagh vehemently. "It matters very, very much; you shan't go home."

"I don't want to be havin' yez taken to prison for

a poor omadhaun like me," repeated Theresa, trying to tear her dress away from Winnie's firm hold.

"I don't care what you want; you shall stay where you are till we can do something to help you," returned Murtagh, pulling her into the centre of the bush again, while Winnie, turning to Rose, said with flashing eyes:

"I think you're a selfish coward, with your sneaking plans, and I wish with all my heart you weren't my sister, so I do."

"I don't believe you are our sister," added Murtagh, passionately. "If papa heard you he'd never speak to you again all the days of your life. And look here—if you do turn traitor, and let out one single word of what we do, I'll——" He stopped himself suddenly, and Theresa, frightened at the storm she seemed to have raised, put her hand on his arm with an imploring "Mr. Murtagh, dear."

Rosie burst into tears again, and sobbed out that they were very unkind. After that no one spoke. For some minutes Rosie's stifled sobs were the only sound. Then Winnie said: "I have a plan, Murtagh. How do you think this would do?"

Murtagh looked up with a start. He had not been

thinking of plans. He had been thinking what a little coward Rosie was, and that perhaps after all she couldn't help it. All girls were except Winnie.

"Supposing," continued Winnie, "we were to hide her in one of the empty rooms of the house just for the present, and then go this afternoon and get to see Mr. Plunkett somehow and get the rent?"

"Yes, that's the best," said Murtagh, heartily glad to seize any chance of bringing the affair to an end without deserting Theresa.

"Come then," said Winnie, making her way out of the bush. "Run on in front, Bobbo, and see if the road's clear."

"There now," said Bobbo, turning to Rose, "I think that's a good plan; don't you? It'll soon be all over now."

"It would be much better if they took her to Mrs. Daly," replied Rose sulkily, turning her back upon them all, and beginning to move slowly towards the house.

They managed without meeting any one to smuggle poor Theresa into an empty room, close to their own

bed-rooms, and having done that they had next to summon up all their courage for the meeting with Mr. Plunkett. They could not think why they should feel so cowardly about it. Often and often before they had been called up after some scrape to receive a rebuke, which from Mr. Plunkett's lips was sure to be sharp and galling. Sometimes he made them very angry, but they had never before felt nervous and trembled at the thought of an interview. Generally they went to him in a defiant impudent mood, and talked as much as he did, but to-day matters were changed. They had to ask him for a favour. And, besides, those dreadful police seemed to make everything so different.

"What shall we say to him, Win?" asked Murtagh, sitting on the banisters of the stairs leading down from their rooms.

"I don't know exactly," said Winnie; "Rosie always talks to him best."

"I hate talking civilly to him," remarked Murtagh meditatively.

"Let Rosie do it," suggested Bobbo.

"I don't suppose she will," returned Murtagh, with

a glance towards the girls' room where Rosie had remained. "Besides——"

"She may just as well be of some use," said Winnie. "It's all because of her that we have to do it in such a hurry." Then raising her voice, she called—"Rosie!"

"Well?" returned Rosie from the bed-room.

Winnie waited for Rosie to come, but seeing that she did not she called again—"Look here!"

"Well, what do you want?" returned Rosie without moving.

"Come out here. We can't go shouting secrets all over the house."

"I don't want to have any secrets," replied Rosie.

"All right; don't then," answered Winnie.

Murtagh muttered—"Little brute," adding after a pause: "Which of us two is the best for talking?"

"I will, if you like," said Winnie. "After all, I don't care. He's an old nuisance, and it's no use bothering our heads what to say to him. Let's say whatever comes to our tongues."

"It would be a queer saying I'd say if I did that," returned Murtagh. "However, let's go and do whatever we're going to do."

But Bobbo never could make up his mind to feel quite comfortable while a quarrel was going on between Rosie and Murtagh and Winnie.

"I'll just see again if Rosie won't come," he said. "We had much better keep together."

So the others waited while he went back to Rosie's room.

In the mean time, though Rosie pretended not to care what Winnie and Murtagh thought of her, she really cared a great deal, and she was standing by the bedroom window crying, wishing she had never said anything about taking Theresa home. However, when Bobbo put his head in at the door and began—"I say, Rosie—" she hastily dried her eyes, and her answer "Well?" was as grumpy as ever. She didn't want to make them dislike her more, but she could not help feeling sulky the minute any one spoke to her. Bobbo did not pay any attention to that, but came into the room, and continued:

"I say, Ro, I wish you'd come too; you blarney old

Plunkett much better than any of us. You might just as well come."

"I don't want to go anywhere where I'm not wanted," returned Rosie. "Murtagh and Winnie don't like me helping, so I'd rather stay here."

To all Bobbo's persuasions she continued to give the same answer, till at last, thinking it was no use to stay any longer, he took hold of the handle of the door, saying: — "Don't be a donkey, Ro; Murtagh and Winnie are different, you know. They don't understand about people being afraid, and things. They think it's so awfully sneaky to be afraid. You'd much better come."

The door-handle had more effect than all Bobbo's eloquence, and Rosie moved away from the window as she answered again: "I don't want to go anywhere where I'm not wanted."

"Don't be a duffer. Come along; you'll get round old Plunkett better than any of us," replied Bobbo, seeing that he had gained his point, and turning round he began to walk away.

"I'm sure I want to help Theresa just as much as

any one," said Rosie, as she followed him, "but Winnie and Murtagh don't like me interfering."

"I hope to goodness there will be no women in heaven," ejaculated Murtagh.

"Except me, Myrrh," said Winnie, and then they all went clattering down the staircase.

CHAPTER X.

But as they reached *terra firma*—for taking into consideration the manner in which they habitually descended it that was scarcely a fit name for the staircase—the first bell rang for dinner, reminding them that it would be useless to go yet to the Red House. Mr. Plunkett would not be down-stairs till the afternoon.

They had nothing to give Theresa to eat, so Winnie and Bobbo went off to the garden to get her some apples, while Murtagh and Rosie returned to the school-room. There they found Nessa waiting anxiously for news.

During their absence the wildest reports had come up from the village.

Mrs. Donegan's story, though exaggerated of course in its details by the time it reached the children, was in part true. The miller had really given evidence which

caused some policemen to be sent to search the island and the woods that fringed that part of the river. The child's disappearance had naturally caused a great sensation in the little place. It had been the topic of all conversation for several days. In many minds it had been vaguely connected with the attempt upon Mr. Plunkett's life, and if some of the inhabitants of the village were better informed as to the latter event there was a very general impression that "there were terrible things going about."

The village mind was prepared for a tragic ending of the mystery, and now that it seemed on the point of being explained the excitement was considerable. A small crowd of women and boys trooped off in the same direction as the police, in order to have the first news of that "poor, blessed child," as Theresa was generally called, and those who remained behind would have thought it a sign of "rale want o' feelin'" to do any work.

Cabins were left unswept, dinners uncooked, pigs unfed. The whole population of the little village turned out into the street, and wondered, and conjectured, and shook their heads, and had a little drink at the shop at

the corner just to keep up their spirits; till from one cause or another they had worked themselves into a state of mind in which accuracy was far from being one of the predominant qualities.

No wonder then that the most extraordinary stories were brought to Mrs. Donegan and Nessa. The discovery of the fire lighted in the island hut was to the police of little importance, since it was well known that the children spent much of their time there; but in the village it was speedily transformed into circumstantial evidence of the crime which every one had long ago decided to have been committed. Rumours and conjectures spread like wild-fire. In vain Mrs. Donegan and Nessa tried to find out the truth. Some said one thing and some another, and poor old Donnie so implicitly believed always the worst account that Nessa grew thoroughly confused, and felt half-terrified at the barbarism of a place where every one seemed to think it quite natural and probable that a little girl should be carried off and murdered in order to annoy her mother.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come back!" she exclaimed, as Murtagh and Rosie entered the school-room. "Tell me what is true about Mrs. Daly's little girl.

Your countrymen talk so wildly I really cannot understand them."

There was nothing wanting but this to complete the children's distress. They had come to the school-room thoroughly wearied out, and they really could not talk over the subject of all their troubles.

"If you can't understand Irishmen you can't understand me," replied Murtagh, throwing himself into an arm-chair.

His tone was almost rude. Nessa flushed a little, and turning to Rosie she continued:

"They told us such dreadful stories. They said—they said—the floor of the hut was covered with blood; but one said one thing and one another till it was not possible to understand. It is not true, is it? It cannot be true."

It was too much; Rosie could not bear it. Her only answer was a burst of tears.

"Oh, *Mon Dieu!*" said Nessa. "Her poor mother! Is it so bad as that? Is she really dead?"

"No more dead than I am," exclaimed Murtagh, springing from the chair and walking impatiently to the window.

Rosie sobbed on, and Nessa now utterly bewildered put her arms round her and asked soothingly: "What is it that makes you cry?"

Rosie twisted herself out of Nessa's arms and made no answer. Nessa looked inquiringly towards Murtagh, but he was standing with his back turned to her staring out of the window, and almost counting every sob of Rosie's.

At last he turned and said quietly: "Don't you think you had better go upstairs, Rose?"

Without stopping her tears Rosie went slowly out of the room, and they heard her sobs growing fainter and fainter as she walked away down the long passage.

"What is it?" asked Nessa half-timidly, as the sound of the last sob died away. "Is it something about the little girl, or have you——" She stopped, fearing to offend Murtagh by suggesting that they might have quarrelled.

Poor Murtagh was at his wit's end. It was all bad enough as it was without these questions. He did not know what to do. To answer one was only to open the way to more. He felt that his secret was on the point of slipping from him, and he did not know how to keep it.

In despair he turned round to his cousin with a mute pleading look that said more than words. There were no tears in his eyes. They were like the eyes of some dumb animal in pain; they did not ask for help—they seemed only to implore a little patience. Nessa had never seen a child look like that; she felt as though she were in the presence of a real trouble.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she exclaimed almost involuntarily, and then remembering that Murtagh was only a little fellow she put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"Don't be so sad," she said.

Murtagh's heart bounded at her kindness. It was nearly five years since any one had caressed him so. He kissed her warmly back again, tears that had not been there before springing to his eyes. Then little Ellie ran into the school-room, and bounding into Nessa's arms imperiously commanded her to "tum to dinner, tum to dinner, betoz I is so hungry."

The luncheon-bell ringing loudly seconded her request, and they all moved away together to the dining-room.

Ellie was in high spirits, and Murtagh and Nessa

devoted themselves to the little lady, till towards the middle of dinner Winnie and Bobbo came in from the garden.

"You are rather late," said Nessa.

"Yes," replied Winnie; "we were getting apples, and Bland nearly caught us, so we had to run round the long way. He did catch me, but I wriggled away from him. We brought the apples all safe," she added, turning to Murtagh.

"All right," said Murtagh shortly.

Winnie glanced quickly from him to Nessa, and then subsided into silence.

"I thought you ought not to take the apples," said Nessa.

"No," replied Bobbo, "but we had to; we wanted them."

The children were bad actors. Nessa wondered what was the matter, and wondered why none of them made the slightest allusion to the event which had apparently been so deeply interesting to them in the morning. It flashed across her that they were in some way connected with the disappearance of the little girl, but the idea seemed so improbable that she could

scarcely accept it. She would not try to guess their secret; so she did for them what they could not do for themselves—she made conversation, and almost succeeded in covering their embarrassment.

After luncheon she was standing before the drawing-room fire, when the door opened and Murtagh ran in. To her surprise he threw his arms round her and kissed her. Then, blushing a little at what he had done, he said earnestly:

"You're awfully kind. I'll tell you about everything this evening," and without waiting for her to answer he ran away again.

His heart had been deeply touched by her sympathy in the morning, and when they had all started to go to the Red House he felt a sudden impulse to rush into the drawing-room and thank her. It was so quickly done that the others did not miss him. He joined them before they reached the door, and they slowly proceeded together across the park.

Rosie was with them, and having completely recovered from her fit of crying she was very anxious now to regain her place in Winnie's and Murtagh's esteem.

All the time that the others had been at dinner she had spent in thinking. She felt really sorry for having broken down and cried before Nessa. If Murtagh and Winnie had been angry with her for that she could have understood them much better. That did deserve their contempt. "It was very hard too," she thought, "just at the end, when they were going to get the rent and have all the happy part of taking Theresa home, that she should be separated from them, as it were, and lose her share in the pleasure." Above all, she could not bear to be thought cowardly and stupid. She liked people to be fond of her. The result of her thinking was that she determined to do her best to coax Mr. Plunkett to give them the rent. "For if I get the rent for them," she thought, "then they can't say I didn't do as much for Theresa as any one."

Consequently she was in one of her very pleasantest humours as she walked across the park, and Winnie and Murtagh wondered at her as she talked brightly about what she was going to say to Mr. Plunkett, sketched little scenes of Mrs. Daly's delight when Theresa was given back to her, and dwelt pleasantly

upon how 'jolly' they would all feel afterwards for having saved Theresa.

But though they wondered, they were certainly cheered, and felt far bolder when they arrived at the Red House than they had done for some time past.

Bland was coming out as they passed in at the garden gate. He scowled at Winnie and Bobbo, but Winnie shrugged her shoulders and looked up at him with such a bright laugh that he could scarcely help smiling as he hurried away, and growled out in a would-be surly voice:

"Ye'll no do well to go in there."

Without heeding the warning they went round to the backyard.

"We want to see Mr. Plunkett, please, Biddy," said Rose to the servant, who was hanging out clothes to dry.

"Faix it's roses at Christmas-time we'll be havin' soon," returned Biddy with a good-natured laugh. But the children were in no mood for joking, even at Mr. Plunkett's expense, so they walked soberly up to the door, while Rose asked what room he was in.

"Ye're joking, Miss Rose," replied Biddy. "You

wouldn't be goin' in to him in rale earnest. Why it's like a mad bull in a china shop he is to-day, with the polis comin' in an' out, and one thing an' another."

"But we must go in," said Murtagh. "We have some business that we must speak to him about."

"Sure, Mr. Murtagh, honey, is it going to be married ye are, and come for him to draw out the dockiments?" answered Biddy, laughing outright.

"Stop being a donkey, Biddy," said Winnie decidedly, "and tell us where he is."

"Where is he? By St. Patrick, if he was where I'd like him to be, it's the fardest end o' the pole from Biddy Connolly."

"Shut up your tomfoolery," said Bobbo impatiently, while Winnie exclaimed:

"Come along; let us go in without her."

But at that Biddy dropped the wet clothes she held into the basket and ran to the doorway.

"Is it mad ye are, Miss Rose? Ye can't go in there. The missus 'd be out upon me in a minnit if I let yez in. Poor Missus, God bless her! the way she do slave after that old skinflint!"

"Do let us in," said Rose, coaxingly. "We've got business."

"I can't, Miss Rose. 'Deed I can not. You don't know the bother he'd kick up!"

"Oh, nonsense!" exclaimed Winnie, pushing past; "we can't help it; perhaps it'll bother him well again."

And so with a little more insistance, and more expostulations from Biddy, they made their way to the parlour and knocked at the door.

"Come in," called Mr. Plunkett.

"If ye will, ye will, an' I can't help yez," remarked Biddy, shaking her head compassionately as the children went into the room.

Mr. Plunkett was sitting in an arm-chair next the window, with his back turned to the door. There was no one else in the room, and having entered, the children stood hesitating for a moment near the door where he could not see them. Now that they were actually in his room their courage seemed all to have vanished. Their hearts were beating fast, they had a queer sensation in their throats, and not one of them could have spoken a word just then.

"Is that you, Marion?" inquired Mr. Plunkett, in

a voice so gentle that the children could scarcely believe it was Mr. Plunkett who was speaking.

"No," faltered Rosie. Then plucking up courage she advanced towards his chair, and said in her most winning manner: "I hope you're feeling better now. It was so unlucky, wasn't it, that you fell under poor Black Shandy?"

"Thank you; I am somewhat recovered," replied Mr. Plunkett in his usual severe voice, and the children no longer doubted their ears.

"Did it hurt you very much?" inquired Rosie.

"I suffered considerably."

"I'm so sorry," said Rosie. "I do hate being hurt so." After a little pause she continued, the colour mounting to her cheeks: "We have come to ask you a favour, and we do hope you'll grant it." Here she paused again, blushing violently, and not quite knowing how to proceed. Murtagh, Winnie, and Bobbo came slowly into view, and Mr. Plunkett's face on seeing them did not look as though he were going to grant a favour.

"By what door did you come in?" he inquired sharply.

"We came in together by the back door," answered Winnie.

"I should like to know where Bridget was. These Irish servants are all alike careless and gossiping. I suppose her mind is too much taken up by the village mystery to allow her to pay attention to work."

"I'd rather have one Irish than——" began Murtagh indignantly, his temper rising as usual in Mr. Plunkett's presence, but Winnie trod on his foot and reduced him to silence.

"We all know, sir, that you would rather anything which gives you an opportunity for contradiction," returned Mr. Plunkett severely. "Perhaps if you had had as much trouble as I have had about the disappearance of this girl you would prefer not to have the additional one of seeing your servants abandon their work and leave your house open to whoever chooses to enter."

Winnie nudged Murtagh again as a hint to remain silent, but a sense of justice to Biddy made him answer:

"Biddy didn't run away from her work. She didn't want us to come in."

"And I suppose you thought my house was like your uncle's garden, to be broken into at pleasure when

you want something out of it. Bland has just been with me, and he tells me you have been taking apples again. If it were not for this unfortunate accident, I can assure you you should be punished as you deserve."

Murtagh made no answer. After a short silence Mr. Plunkett turned to Rosie and said: "Well, and what is the favour I am expected to grant?"

Poor Rosie felt that it was almost impossible now to ask it. She blushed and stammered: "I—I—at least —we—I mean—"

"Be so kind as to speak plainly. I do not understand what you are asking," said Mr. Plunkett.

Rosie looked as if she were going to cry, but Winnie in her clear voice said:

"We want you, please, to let Mrs. Daly off paying the two sovereigns she owes for her rent."

Now that it was out the children all breathed more freely. Rose recovered herself, and they stood waiting anxiously for Mr. Plunkett's reply.

He was surprised. He had expected them to ask something for themselves, and he was fully prepared to refuse, but this request astonished him so much that he paused. Though a hard man he was not at heart so

disagreeable as the children imagined. To them he could not speak kindly, for he honestly believed them to be bad, but he spoke kindly to his own well-brought-up children, and he had in his way felt sorry for poor Mrs. Daly in her trouble.

For a moment he felt almost inclined to say yes. But then he considered that when the moment came for arranging such matters with Peter Daly there would be no necessity for the interference of the children, and he felt in no way disposed to give them a gratification.

The children stood like little statues while he thought. It seemed a good sign that he should take so long about it. At last the answer came:

"The paying of rent is a business transaction which does not in any way concern you. You may be quite sure that as your uncle's representative I will do whatever is right in the matter. And now, will you allow me to beg that at another time you will not force your way into my house when my servants tell you that it is contrary to my orders for any one to be admitted." And Mr. Plunkett taking up a newspaper began to read.

"But are you going to let her off paying?" inquired Winnie, standing on one foot and scratching up and down

the stocking with the point of her other boot. "We want to know awfully badly."

"I shall do what I consider right after consulting with your uncle."

"Oh, I know Uncle Blair will say 'Give it to her,'" said Rosie; "and if you would say 'Yes' now we would be so very much obliged. We have a most particular reason for wanting it."

"It will be quite time enough to consider such matters when something more certain is known of the fate of the poor woman's daughter," returned Mr. Plunkett.

"Oh, but," said Rose, not feeling quite sure how much to tell, "perhaps if it was quite certain about the money then there would be some more known about Theresa. You know," she added coaxingly, "there are such wonderful little fairies in the world that know all about everything."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Mr. Plunkett sitting up straight in his chair. "You can't mean to say!——" But there his feelings seemed to become too strong for words, and he paused, looking at Murtagh.

"We mean to say," said Rose, in a pleasant voice,

rapidly determining that whatever happened she would not go away without letting him know that they had Theresa, "that if you'll give us the rent for Mrs. Daly perhaps we'll find Theresa and bring her back all safe and sound. Don't we, Murtagh?"

"But we mean to say, too," said Murtagh grimly, looking at Rose, "that we can't possibly find out anything about her, nor say a single word more, unless we do get the rent."

"This is too much!" exclaimed Mr. Plunkett. "Do you mean to tell me, you graceless young scoundrel, that your pranks are at the bottom of all the trouble and worry we have had? Do you mean to say that for your own amusement you have given me all this trouble with the police, turned a whole village upside down for a week, and nearly killed a poor suffering woman with anxiety for her lost child! I have no language to express my opinion of you, sir."

"My dear James!" exclaimed Mrs. Plunkett, coming into the room at that moment. "What is the matter? Rosie! Bobbo! Winnie! *and* Murtagh!" she added in astonishment. "How in the world did you get into this room? Did you send for them, James?

What have they been doing? You know, dear, the doctors said you were not to be excited."

"It is of little use for doctors or for any one to lay down rules while such children as these are allowed to run wild," replied Mr. Plunkett.

"Though you have confessed it yourselves," he continued, turning to Murtagh, "I can scarcely believe that you can have behaved in a manner so totally devoid of all Christian feeling. But it is the old story: mischief is your god. So long as you can have the excitement of a bit of mischief you care nothing at all for the feelings of others; and I have no doubt it seems to you an excellent joke to persuade a dying woman's child to run away, and to embitter the last days of a poor mother's life.

"I suppose that between you, you have lost, or perhaps spent, the money entrusted to the child, and now you think that to take it out of your uncle's pocket will be an easy way of paying it back. It does not surprise me in you, Murtagh; but was there not one among you," he added, looking at the other three, "who could have remembered that you hold the position of young ladies and gentlemen?"

"You see you set us such a good example of forgetting what a gentleman is like that we really couldn't be expected to remember," replied Murtagh coolly.

"When you come to my house I must beg that you will not be insolent, sir," replied Mr. Plunkett angrily.

"Come along, Myrrh; don't be silly," said Winnie, moving towards the door. "How could he know why gentlemen do things?"

"Winnie," exclaimed Mrs. Plunkett, "how can you talk in such a way?"

"Mr. Plunkett shouldn't be so impertinent to Murtagh," returned Winnie, who had two hot red spots in her cheeks.

"I never saw such children in my life. I'm sure I pity that poor young girl who has to live amongst you," said Mrs. Plunkett, half crying. "To speak of my husband in such a manner!"

"Serve him right!" ejaculated Bobbo.

"You deserve every one of you to have your ears boxed," exclaimed Mrs. Plunkett, who was at no time famous for self-control.

"Catch us first," laughed Winnie. "Come along,

Bobbo." She led the way down the passage as she spoke, and in another minute they were far on their way across the park, their cause hopelessly and irretrievably lost.

CHAPTER XI.

"I'LL tell you what," said Murtagh, when they were once more at home, and had fully realised that Mr. Plunkett had not only refused them the rent but what was more he knew that they were hiding Theresa, "I told Nessa I'd tell her everything this evening. You see, I thought it would be all right by then; and supposing we went down and told her now, and got her to help us."

The others were silent; it was rather a bold proposal.

"She's like us, you know," suggested Murtagh. "I think she'd understand about things."

Rosie looked anxiously towards Winnie, hoping she would say yes, but not venturing herself to give an opinion.

"All right," said Winnie, after considering a minute. "I think that's best. She might know of some plan."

"Let us go then," said Murtagh. "Whatever we do we ought to be quick about."

It was easy to be quick about getting to the drawing-room door, but there they paused. When they came to think about it, Theresa really was an awkward subject of conversation; and after the experience they had just had with Mr. Plunkett they began to feel doubtful as to what view Nessa might take of the matter.

However, something had to be done; so taking their courage in their two hands they somewhat shamefacedly entered the room. Nessa, with a big dictionary in her lap, was sitting reading Italian by the fire, and she paid little attention to their entry.

They none of them knew how to begin, but stood upon the hearth-rug alternately looking at her and glancing inquiringly at each other. The longer the silence lasted the more impossible did it seem to break it. At last Winnie began to poke the fire, and that gave Murtagh courage.

"I say," he began. But then Winnie stopped poking to listen to him, and the dead silence was too disconcerting; he stopped short as suddenly as he had begun.

"What were you going to say?" asked Nessa, raising her eyes from her book. And then in sudden surprise at the perturbed countenances of the children, she exclaimed, "Why, what is the matter?"

"Well," said Murtagh, plunging without further hesitation into his subject, "we don't know what to do, and we want to talk to you. We've been thinking about you, and we thought, you know, that you're different somehow. I mean we thought you'd think true about things instead of only about 'Christian,' and 'mischief,' and 'young ladies and gentlemen.' I mean," he continued, contracting his forehead as he puzzled himself with his own attempt to explain, "it's so queer the way people are. If things are kind, or brave, or anything, then they talk about young ladies and gentlemen; and the things seem all wrong, somehow—but they aren't really wrong, you know, all the time; only it makes me get in such a rage."

"I—I don't think I quite understand," said Nessa,

fairly bewildered in her attempt to follow the meaning of his somewhat complicated preamble.

"Well, I mean—" said Murtagh. "We've got Theresa, you know."

"You have what?" exclaimed Nessa, more puzzled than ever. His last words were plain enough, certainly, but they could not possibly mean what they seemed to mean. In vain she tried to see the smallest connection between them and the foregoing sentences.

"I beg your pardon. It's very stupid of me," she said, apologetically; "but I really don't understand. It must be some English I don't know."

"No, no," said Murtagh. "You'll be able to understand quite well. We'll tell you how it happened, and then you'll see. It was the day after you came. We were going up the river fishing; and Ellie couldn't—Win, you tell it; you'll tell it better than me."

The children's embarrassment was completely gone now. They were only eager for Nessa to know all about it; and beginning at the beginning Winnie with various interruptions from the others told the whole story to the end.

Nessa's amazement, when she began to understand

the drift of what they had to tell her, was unbounded. She did not know children ever did things like that. But before the end of the story her warmest sympathies were enlisted in their cause.

"You see," said Murtagh, when Winnie had described the way in which Mr. Plunkett had received their request, "we never thought about anything except that horrible step-father, and how nice it would be taking her back with the rent and all. And you remember the way Mrs. Daly talked about her husband on Sunday. Well, of course, that only made us think of it more. But Mr. Plunkett always manages to make everything seem wicked, and he makes me wicked in reality. The very feel of him in the air makes me angry before he speaks a word. I do hate him so!"

"Yes," said Nessa, looking troubled. "It is wicked to hate. I wish you would not feel like that, because then you are wrong too. And listen," she continued, turning her face towards Murtagh, who had thrown himself on the floor beside her; "I am sure the reason why he is so disagreeable is just only because he does not understand."

"He never does understand," returned Murtagh

vehemently. "He doesn't choose to understand; he likes to be unjust!"

With a sudden impulsive movement she threw her arms round his neck. "Don't be like that," she said in her sweet pleading voice; "please don't. It is such a pity."

Murtagh had drawn himself up in his anger. At Nessa's caress his muscles relaxed, his face lightened with a slow trembling. Then, possessing himself of one of her hands, he kissed it without a word.

It was not in the least like a child's answer. For the second time that day Nessa felt as though Murtagh were somehow older than she. She looked at him with a sort of surprise, but the strange expression was already gone, and the face he turned up to her was full of affectionate gratitude.

"And now," she said, "let us count our resources." She drew a little green leather purse from her pocket as she spoke and emptied its contents on to the open dictionary. "But I have not enough," she added, looking up almost apologetically. "How much money have you?"

"I've got a shilling," said Rosie.

"I've only twopence," said Winnie; "Bobbo and I have been saving up. He has a penny halfpenny."

"I haven't any," said Murtagh, shaking his head.

Little Ellie, who had been sitting on the rug looking exceedingly solemn while the children talked, gazed attentively at Nessa and the money, and then got up and trotted silently out of the room.

"Well, that is all," said Nessa, after searching in each compartment of her purse; "we must do the best we can with it."

"Yes, but," said Murtagh, "we don't want to take your money. It isn't right you should give it. We couldn't promise your money. We meant to get it."

"You see it is a good thing to have an elder sister," replied Nessa, glancing up from her occupation of counting the coins spread out upon the pages of the dictionary.

"And besides, Murtagh," said Rosie, who felt that Murtagh was not to be trusted, "if you won't take Theresa home without the rent it really is the only way. I don't like taking your money either," she added, colouring and turning towards Nessa, "but what

can we do? We haven't got any except one and twopence halfpenny."

"I should think you very unkind," said Nessa seriously speaking to Murtagh, "if you did not take what I have. But," she added, "even with your money we have not enough."

"Well then," exclaimed Murtagh decidedly, "it is no use for us to take yours. We can't take her back without the whole rent. We must just hide her up in the mountains, and I expect Uncle Blair will make Mr. Plunkett let them off the rent when he knows that will bring Theresa back. We can hide her in some safe place, and nobody on earth can make us say where she is if we don't choose."

"Oh, Murtagh!" exclaimed Nessa, "you don't know what you are saying. It would be enough to kill Mrs. Daly. Even if you had not a sou you must take Theresa back at once. You don't know—you don't know——" Nessa's voice was choked, she could not finish her sentence. She had witnessed the grief of the patient desolate mother. Only yesterday the poor woman had said to her with quiet hopelessness: "Yes, Ma'am, I'm dying—thank God."

And they could talk of prolonging the pain.

"You don't know," she said, raising her head and drying the tears that had suddenly overflowed. "You meant to be kind, and you did do all you could. But—Mrs. Daly loves Theresa."

Her voice was trembling again, and she did not trust herself to say any more. Murtagh was looking at her in consternation. Then all they had done had been a mistake; there was no doubting the meaning of those last few words. His eyes sought Winnie's. Poor children, they were sorely disappointed!

But Nessa had hardly finished speaking when the door was pushed open, and little Ellie rushed into the room shaking a tin money-box up and down.

"Ellie's dold money! Ellie's dold money!" she exclaimed triumphantly. Her little face was beaming with excitement, and running up to Murtagh she thrust the money-box into his hands.

"Ellie'll dive the money; det it out with the scissors," she said. Then ecstatically squeezing herself together she rubbed her hands up and down her cheeks till her face was burning red.

"Dear little Ellie!" exclaimed Nessa, astonished at

the sudden outburst of excitement and taking the child in her arms, while Murtagh tried with a pair of scissors to extract the money from the box.

"It's her half-sovereign that Cousin Jane gave her last Christmas," exclaimed Winnie. "So it is; Donnie's kept it for her all this time."

"It's Ellie's own dold money," said Ellie, with her arms tight round Nessa's neck.

In the pleasure of seeing the rent completed Murtagh forgot his scruples about Nessa's money.

"Three cheers for Ellie," he cried, tossing the money-box up to the ceiling as a glittering half-sovereign fell out upon the table. "It's just right now."

"We want one halfpenny more," said practical Winnie.

"Ellie's dot a ha'penny too," exclaimed the child in delight, wriggling herself down on the floor, "out in the darden."

"That's a rum place for halfpennies," remarked Bobbo.

"It's planted," said Ellie. "For seed," she added gravely, seeing the others inclined to smile.

The children all began to laugh, and Rosie ex-

claimed: "You little silly! you don't suppose money grows from seed, do you?"

Instantly Ellie was transformed back again into her usual quiet little self.

"Me thought ha'pennies might," she murmured, and hid away behind Nessa.

"I think it is true," said Nessa. "I think we do plant money for seed, sometimes. Only not exactly in the garden," she added, smiling as she kissed little Ellie.

And now, there lay the much-wished-for two pounds on the table, and the children were free to take Theresa home that minute. A load was off their minds, and the relief was so great that at first they could hardly realise it, but they did not feel happy as they had expected to feel.

There was no pleasure in looking forward to the meeting with Mrs. Daly. Murtagh felt rather ashamed than otherwise, and wished it was over. Everything had happened so differently from their plans. They did not know how it was; it did not seem to be their fault; but glad as they were to be so near the end of their troubles, it was without any feeling of pleasurable

excitement that they gathered the money and went to set Theresa free.

Theresa, however, felt nothing but the wildest delight. Bobbo first announced to her the good news. He burst into the room where she was hidden, exclaiming, "We've got it, Theresa; we've got it." Then Rose followed rattling the money in her hands, and Theresa, who could hardly believe the news at first, saw that it was really true.

"Ah, Mr. Murtagh, Miss Winnie dear, God bless ye, God bless yez all!" she exclaimed, springing from the corner where she had been sitting, and seizing hold of Murtagh's hands. Half-laughing, half-crying with excitement, she tried to get out some more words of thanks, but could say nothing. Then exclaiming, "Glory be to God," she suddenly sank down upon her knees and burst into tears.

But they were tears of gladness and were over quickly. Drying her eyes with her apron she sprang up again and ran towards the door, saying delightedly, "My mother! Let's run down to her quick. Ah sure, won't she be glad to see us!"

The children followed with pleased faces, and as they

trooped down the stairs Theresa poured out expressions of her thanks and of her delight at getting home.

"Ah, I'll never be able to thank yez right. Let us go on a bit quicker," she was exclaiming, when they rushed round a corner of the passage and nearly knocked Mrs. Donegan off her legs as she was coming slowly along, carrying a cup of tea for Nessa.

"By all the blessed saints and martyrs, and is that you, Theresa Curran?" she exclaimed, fixing her eyes upon Theresa, and forgetting in her astonishment to pick up the teacup, which had been dashed to pieces on the floor. "Riz up from the dead, with the police after you, and the master himself payin' your expenses, an' all."

"Take a good look at her, Donnie, while you're about it. It'll be a long time before you see any one else risen up from the dead, with the police after them, and the master paying their expenses," laughed Murtagh, whose spirits were rapidly rising under the influence of Theresa's joy.

Theresa, blushing and trying not to laugh, curtsied at Mrs. Donegan's notice of her, and the children,

without waiting for more, carried her off like a whirlwind towards the drawing-room.

Donnie followed as close upon their heels as she could. "Miss Nessa, did ye ever hear of such a thing?" she exclaimed, as the children rushing in presented Theresa with an unceremonious "Here she is."

Theresa stood blushing with such a supremely happy face, and the children around her were all so radiant, that the infection spread to Nessa, who laughed like a child as she answered in the words Donnie was so fond of using, "They're wonderful children."

"What is it at all?" inquired Mrs. Donegan. "Did they find her when the police couldn't?"

"That's it exactly, Donnie," laughed Winnie. "Come along, Nessa. Where's your hat? Don't stand palavering with Donnie or we shan't get to Mrs. Daly's till midnight."

"Tum 'long," urged Ellie, pulling Nessa's hand.

"It's wonderful we are *en*tirely," said Murtagh, turning round for a last mock at Donnie as they went out of the room.

"Mr. Launcelot's to the backbone," muttered

Donnie, lifting up her hands. She stood a minute or two after she was left alone, murmuring, "Well, it's wonderful to think of," and then hurried away to the kitchen to tell the great piece of news that Theresa was found, that the children were cleverer than all the police, and found her themselves in no time when once they went to look for her.

CHAPTER XII.

THERESA and Mrs. Donegan had between them put the children into the brightest of moods, and as they danced across the lawn they completely forgot all the wrong side of their adventure and their misgivings about meeting Mrs. Daly.

At the gates some of the lodge-keeper's children were playing. The instant they saw Theresa one ran in shouting the news to his mother, and the others set off like deer to the village calling out to every one they met that the young ladies and gentlemen were coming down the road bringing Theresa along with them.

"What a nuisance!" said Rosie. "Now we shan't be the first to tell Mrs. Daly."

"Pat! Mick! Biddy!" shouted Bobbo. "Come

back, will you." But it was no use; they were too far down the road to pay any attention.

"Perhaps that is better," said Nessa. "She is too weak for a great surprise."

But Nessa was not prepared for the other effect of having the news spread before them.

Every one, man, woman, and child, who heard it, first refused to believe, and then were told to go and see for themselves; so by the time Theresa and her escort reached the village they were surrounded by a miscellaneous crowd, the members of which were not all quite sober, were all wanting to get near Theresa to see if she were there in "real earnest," and were all asking questions as to how she was found, and where she was found, and "what happened her?"

With each addition to their party the children's spirits rose higher and higher. They were determined not to satisfy any one's curiosity, and to every question they responded with some bit of nonsense. They knew every one's private history, and bandied jokes with each new comer till their progress along the road was accompanied by continuous roars of laughter interspersed with a sort of hail of questions.

"Ah, now tell us! How was it ye outwitted the polis an' found her when they couldn't?" called one.

"Outwitted the police," returned Winnie. "Have you come to your age, Kitty, and don't know yet that the police have got no wits to put out?"

"Thrue for ye, Miss Winnie, asthore; it's me own wits are out to ask such a question!"

"But where did yez find her?" asked another, pushing Kitty aside.

"Why where the police didn't find her, of course!" laughed Murtagh.

"Then it's plenty o' places ye had to choose from; but tell us now, Mr. Murtagh, honey, how did yez find her? Was she half-dead or how was she?"

"Not half-dead at all, but dead and a half, and pining for a sight of you, Mrs. Malachy," replied Murtagh, turning to the village schoolmistress.

"Sure, Theresa! Is it yer ownself come back?" cried a woman from the edge of the crowd. "Tell out now; who was it spirited ye away?"

"The fairies—the good people," cried Rose and Winnie together, while Theresa blushed and laughed.

"Ah, Mr. Murtagh, my jewel, give over jokin' and

tell us where ye found her," called Kitty again, having elbowed her way back close to them.

"Wouldn't any one know you're a woman, Kitty?" began Murtagh, when a man on the other side of him interrupted in a heavy voice:

"Don't tell her a word, Mr. Murtagh; she's the curiousest woman in the place."

"And you'd like me to tell you instead," said Murtagh, looking up with a merry twinkle at the light blue stupid eyes. "Ah well, if you want to know, it was Miss Winnie's bright eyes did the business."

"But however was it she did it?" asked the man.

"For shame, Phelim. Were you born on April fool's day not to know that?" laughed Murtagh. "You'd better go home and find out."

"Go to Shuna Toolin an' get her to teach ye," called out several voices amid fresh derisive laughter.

"Tell us round here, Master Bobbo, honey, that niver asked a question," cried a woman persuasively, divining justly that she would get most out of Bobbo.

"Well, it was up there by the river if you want to know so badly," returned Bobbo.

"Up by the river! Why sure that's where the

police looked and niver found a bit of her!" cried several voices together.

"Don't be insulting us comparing us to those omadhauns of police that don't know a whisky press when they see one," called Murtagh.

Roars of laughter interspersed with "Arrah whisht, Mr. Murtagh" greeted that remark. Then some one cried out, "Three cheers for the young ladies and gentlemen," and Nessa's bewildered ears were deafened with three loud "Hurrahs."

"Three groans for the polis!" called another.

In the midst of the hearty groan with which he responded to the invitation Murtagh caught sight of Nessa trying to lift little Ellie out of the crush.

"Carry Miss Ellie, will you, Pat Molony?" he called out, laughing as he spoke at the quaint expression of Nessa's face. Thrusting out two dirty kindly arms from behind her Pat Molony lifted Ellie over Nessa's head, saying gallantly: "It's not fit for the likes o' you, Miss, to be carrying childer. It's more like a white lily ye are;" and when Nessa looked round to thank him she saw Ellie contentedly sitting on his shoulder with one arm round his dirty neck.

In this fashion, joking and laughing, they passed through the village and out on the road close to Mrs. Daly's cabin. Then some ran on to tell her they were coming, and Theresa and the children, refusing to answer any more questions, made their way through the crowd, and hurried forward. At the garden-gate Theresa passed them all, and rushed into the cottage alone.

Murtagh and Winnie were close behind her. They overheard a smothered cry, then—"Oh, my darlint! my darlint! is it you yourself?" and there was something in the intensity of the voice that made them suddenly stop short. The laughter died from their faces, and they stood looking at each other. A strange awe had fallen upon them. The noisy laughing crowd seemed far away; they heard only the kisses that were being exchanged in the dark cottage, and children as they were they understood suddenly something of what the mother had suffered.

Through all their adventure they had never given one thought to her, till Nessa's emotion this afternoon had first opened their eyes. They had forgotten so many things, and now as they stood looking wistfully

into each other's faces they were filled with remorse. What was it that had been wrong in all this? Something had they felt, and yet it had seemed right. Neither of them spoke, they only looked at one another, but they knew that the same thought filled both their minds.

They did not think of entering the cottage, and the crowd seeing them stand still stood still too. A fear ran through it that they were too late,—that Mrs. Daly had died without seeing her daughter. The noise and laughter were suddenly hushed. Some one said, "What's happened?" Faces were turned anxiously towards the door. It was as though a spell had fallen upon them, and for a minute, while Winnie and Murtagh stood gazing into each other's eyes, there was a dead silence. They neither of them ever forgot that strange hush and the bewildering thoughts that filled it.

The silence was broken by Mrs. Daly's voice in the cottage saying: "An' where are they till I thank them?"

Then Theresa ran to the door to call them in, and the crowd seeing that all was right broke into speech again and trooped into the cottage after the children.

Mrs. Daly was sitting up in the bed; Theresa knelt beside her with her arms round her neck.

"I'll never be able to thank yez right," said Mrs. Daly, stretching out two thin hands towards the children; "but if ye care for a poor woman's blessing may it follow ye to the end of your days. And may none of ye ever feel the hundredth part of the sorra' I've had since she's been gone from me."

"True for ye, Mrs. Daly. May they have peace and happiness all the days of their life for the good turn they've done to the poor this day," cried some from behind with a ring of feeling in their voices.

The children stood by the bedside blushing.

"But we didn't," said Murtagh to Mrs. Daly—"we didn't do what you think; I mean, we didn't find her to-day. We knew where she was; we helped her to hide from her step-father when she lost the rent; but she's got it now." He spoke with difficulty, and he was glad to have got it all out.

Mrs. Daly hardly seemed to pay attention to the sense of the words. She had got her arms round Theresa and was thinking only of her.

"It's all one," she answered. "Ye've brought her back alive, an' I thought she was dead."

A few minutes more and the children had left the cottage. The crowd stayed behind anxious to hear at last Theresa's story, and they walked soberly along the road with Nessa.

"Isn't it delightful," said Rosie, "to think that it's all so well over?"

"Berry belightful," returned Ellie so emphatically that she made them all laugh. But then she wanted to know—"What for all the people were laughin'?" and while Rose explained the other children walked on silently. They were not inclined to talk about it yet.

CHAPTER XIII.

In the mean time Mr. Blair had heard from Mr. Plunkett an account of the children's behaviour which was certainly not flattering to them, and at dinner that evening he spoke about it to Nessa.

"Mr. Plunkett does not know how to manage people," she said, after she had explained the story from the children's point of view. "It is a pity."

"Ah!" said her uncle, amused at the quaint gravity with which she announced her opinion.

"I do not like him," she continued. "He is hard. He is bad for the children."

"What! have you been thinking about it?" said her uncle, smiling. "If you have I suppose you must be right, but you astonish me. I thought he was wonderfully good for the children."

"No," said Nessa, "because he does not understand them, and he does not like them. He makes them angry. Listen," she continued; "I think it would be very difficult for these children to be good. They have but two things. Mr. Plunkett thinks that all they do is wrong, and the others—the other people—think that all is right. It is very bad for them. It is bad for them to be so much scolded, and it is bad for them to be so much flattered."

"So Plunkett thinks all is wrong, does he?" asked Mr. Blair.

"Yes," said Nessa; "he does not see anything but the wrong, and he scolds the children, oh, in such a very disagreeable way. He stirs up all their wicked thoughts; he makes them proud and angry; and then I think they *like* to do what he does not want."

"But, my dear child, that is the only rule I have ever been able to discover for children's behaviour. They always like to do what I don't want," said her uncle. "Why do they always bang the doors? Why do they always shout under my windows? Why do they get up at six o'clock in the morning and clatter up and down the passage when I am enjoying my

soundest sleep? Answer me all those questions if you can, little advocate."

"They bang the doors because they are always in a hurry," said Nessa, smiling. "And they shout because they are happy. And they get up early—— Well, the birds get up early too."

"Well, well, well," replied her uncle, laughing, "if you will have it your own way I suppose you must. But you must learn to appreciate Plunkett's other qualities. He is a splendid fellow; he saves me more trouble than twenty other men would do in his place."

"Perhaps he is very useful," said Nessa, willing always to be polite. "But he is not interesting," she added decidedly.

"He is most interesting to me," returned Mr. Blair, still laughing. "I have twenty pounds now for every ten I used to have, and he has succeeded in making the cottagers round about keep roofs on their houses, and conform to a few other customs of civilisation, unpicturesque perhaps, but very desirable. He has done it at the risk of his life too," he continued, in a more serious tone. "More than one of the men about here would think it a praiseworthy action to shoot him from

behind a hedge some dark night. Plunkett knows it, and after all, little lady, your martyrs of the middle ages did not do so very much more than persevere in their duty when they knew it might cost them their life."

"Yes, that is brave," said Nessa, looking up.

Her uncle's words made Mr. Plunkett's character appear to her in a new light, but they gave her an unpleasant creeping sensation. She was beginning to think that Ireland was a very unsafe place to live in.

"Well," said her uncle, as they rose to leave the dining-room, "are you convinced now of Plunkett's excellent qualities?"

"Yes," replied Nessa, coming back to her former train of thought, "but——"

"But what?"

"I do not think I could like him; he is not kind."

"Ah, you true woman!" replied Mr. Blair, as he held the door open for her. "You won't acknowledge yourself beaten; but ask his little daughter Marion if he is not kind."

Instead of going to the drawing-room Nessa went straight to the school-room to join the children, but

she found it empty; the children were out, Peggy told her. Intending to wait for them a little while she went to the window and threw it open to see what the night was like. The air was warm for an autumn evening, and very still. No sound to be heard but the rippling of the river. In the dark blue sky above shone the full moon; and the park, gently undulating, lay gleaming in its silvery light. Deep black shadows from the trees fell here and there, but not a breath stirred the branches. It seemed as though the world were all asleep, and the river singing a lullaby.

Nessa rested her arms on the window-sill, and stayed there looking out. The events of the day had made her wonderfully thoughtful, and this moonlit park was more in keeping with her mood than the warm, bright drawing-room. After a while, however, her thoughts slid gradually into fancies, and she found herself dreamingly gazing out, imagining how fairies might haunt those shadowy hollows and come out from among the trees to dance on the silvered slopes.

The flowing of the stream seemed to interweave itself with her fancies, and make music for mystic dancing. She was not thinking; the beauty of the

night, the stillness, the soft cadence of the water, played upon her mind and made sweet dreamy pictures there, till at last with the fairy music mixed something more tangible—sounds that seemed to be actually coming nearer.

Surely those last notes were real. They swelled by degrees into a plaintive melody that floated for a moment on the still air, then sunk again. The water rippled on over its stony bed, and Nessa looking at the dark trees and moonlit grass half-wondered if the music had really been or if she had only imagined it.

Presently the sweet notes rose again, clearer this time and fuller, gaining strength as they went on. Then a fresh young voice began to sing strange words that Nessa did not understand, but that seemed to blend in harmony with the stream, and the night, and her fancies. The music came nearer and nearer; another voice joined the first, but after a while both music and voices died away. A faint reflection, as it were, of the sounds lingered in the air; and Nessa, listening for more, heard them soon again coming from a different direction. They seemed in some mysterious way to be behind her. She wondered how that could be, and

then became aware that they were in the house, crossing the hall and coming down the passage. The music was plain enough now,—a violin; and a girl's and a boy's voice together were singing a wild Irish song.

"Can it be the children?" thought Nessa, as she turned away from the window to listen. Soon her doubt was set at rest; the door of the school-room slowly opened, and Winnie entered singing, followed by Murtagh who was playing the violin and singing too.

They did not see Nessa, who had withdrawn into the shadow of the curtain, but stood still together in a broad strip of moonlight near the table singing as though their whole souls were in the song. Winnie's head was a little thrown back, her face looked white, her eyes unnaturally large and dark in the strange light. Murtagh had bent his head to one side over the violin, and his face was in shadow.

Nessa stood entranced watching the weird little figures. But as their voices rose to a sort of strange sweet wail that formed the refrain of their song, Murtagh's hand slipped. A sudden shriek of wrong notes was the result; both the children stopped singing, and he impatiently flung the violin on the table, exclaiming:

"But that is not brave," said Nessa gently. "I do not think we need be afraid of our lives," she continued, after a moment's silence, "because there is always so much good that we don't know of. I felt afraid when I had to come here, and now I am very happy after all."

"Yes, but," said Murtagh, "it isn't like that; only it does puzzle me so about the wrong sides of things. We were so wretched all the week trying to keep Theresa, and we couldn't laugh at anything, and when we woke up in the morning we thought about her the first thing. But then we thought we ought to keep her; we thought Rosie was talking nonsense. Well, afterwards, all of a sudden, we find out we were all wrong somehow?"

"Oh no," said Nessa, "you were not all wrong. How can you say that when you were so kind and so brave?"

Murtagh's face brightened for a moment, but then he said: "Yes; but Winnie and I have been thinking, and it came right in the end because you helped us; but we didn't bring it right. We only made Mrs. Daly miserable, and Theresa miserable, and ourselves miserable.

We wouldn't desert her because we always thought it was beastly mean deserting people, and all the time Rosie was right; and it is very funny, being brave is worse than being cowardly."

"Ah," said Nessa, "but you are mistaking the part that was wrong. If you had been older you would not have hidden Theresa in the island at all, because you would have known all the trouble it would bring; you would have come at once to Uncle Blair. But then you couldn't help not being older, and when you had hidden her there, much the best thing you could do was to be brave. If you had taken her back at first you would never have got the money."

The explanation satisfied Murtagh for a moment, but then he said: "It wasn't our keeping her that got the money. If you hadn't been here we could never have got it. And supposing it had done what Mr. Plunkett said; supposing it had killed Mrs. Daly?"

But Nessa was not accustomed to explain things, and she felt that she was growing puzzled. She was not puzzled a bit by the fact—of course she knew that it was better to be brave than to be cowardly, better to try to help people when they are in trouble than to leave them

to take care of themselves—but by the difficulty of putting her conviction into words.

"I don't know how to explain," she said at last; "but I know I love you for doing as you did."

Bobbo sitting nearest her gave her hand a fervent squeeze. It was new and pleasant to them to be loved.

"And wait one moment," she continued; "I think now I can explain a little too. You know we are not perfect, and the thing we have to do is to try and be as good as we can. We are quite sure to make mistakes, but I think we ought to be brave enough to go on trying and trying to the end; and then God *is* kind; he will let us have done most good by the time we have to stop. Don't you think so?"

"I think if you were always there we should always do most good," said Murtagh warmly, kneeling beside her.

And Nessa, changing her manner, laughed and kissed his forehead, saying: "Ah, you mad fellow, if I were always with you I would not let you do so many foolish things, and you would wish me very far away."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE children's waking on the following day was a very happy one. For the last week the remembrance of Theresa had fallen like a cloud upon them the instant they opened their eyes, but this morning they sprang with light hearts from their beds. That trouble was over and gone, and all the world looked bright in consequence. It was the day for Indian letters too, the day that they all loved best in the fortnight, for there were generally two good letters, one from papa and one from mamma, and papa's letters especially were almost like stories, only better. Out of doors the sun shone, the wind was warm, birds were singing among the reddening leaves, the river sparkled and flashed invitingly. It was more like a day in August than October, and the children resolved to enjoy it.

They danced with joyous faces into the dining-room to breakfast; they seemed created to be happy. Their uncle was not there, and the post-bag lying by his plate was locked. Murtagh might smell it, shake it, try to lift up the flap and peep as much as he pleased, his anxiety for a letter had to remain unsatisfied till Mr. Blair made his appearance. But then, could anything be more delightful?—a nice fat letter from papa for Murtagh, and one from mamma for Rosie.

No sooner was Murtagh's handed to him than he bounded with it out of the window. There Nessa saw him kiss it, turn head over heels three or four times on the grass, and then tear away at full speed round the corner of the house. Breakfast was nearly over when he returned, with a radiant face, and handed the letter to Winnie to read, remarking, "It's awfully nice."

"Yes; and isn't it nice that you are to have half a sovereign for your birthday?" said Rosie, giving him her letter.

"Oh, yes, awfully jolly. Papa says I am to have one from Mr. Plunkett," he added, turning to his uncle. "Does he tell you? he says he will."

"Yes," said Mr. Blair. "When is your birthday?"

"Wednesday week," replied Murtagh. "Come along out," he exclaimed, after devoting himself during an interval of about three minutes to his breakfast, "and let us read what the pretty mother says. You come too, Nessa, and you shall hear papa's letter also. We'll go to the big chestnut-tree; that's where we always read their letters aloud." And taking a bit of bread to supplement his hasty meal he rose from the table and led the way out.

"We get up in the branches," said Rosie, when a few minutes later they were walking along out of doors, "and sometimes we pretend it's a sort of church."

"Only, last letter day," said Winnie, "we pretended we were a family of squirrels, and mamma's letter was a dear little white dove flown over the seas to tell us not to steal nuts and apples from the other squirrels. Of course, you know, she didn't say anything about them really, but she often does tell us to be good, and that's the same as not stealing is for squirrels. It's such fun pretending, and then we put little pieces in the letters."

"And then we went off to Nut Wood to get ourselves some instead of stealing," said Bobbo, "and when Winnie was up in the very top branch of the bull's-eye tree, Mr. Plunkett came past and saw her, and called out, 'What are you stealing those nuts for?'"

"And I thought about him being a squirrel, and running up and down the trees whisking his tail," interrupted Winnie, "and I laughed so much I tumbled off the tree, and gave myself such a whack I haven't quite got well yet."

"And another day we were just Irish kings and queens, the way we generally are, and papa's letter was some river fairies come down to warn us about some scoundrelly English taking our chief palace—that's the island, you know. We rushed up there at once, and lo and behold! when we got there what do you think we found? That old piggamy, Mr. Plunkett, had chopped down our watch-tower, a splendid old oak-tree that had its branches blasted with lightning, the only one on the island. So the English had been there true enough."

They chattered on in this fashion till the big chestnut-tree was reached,—a splendid old tree, with gnarled

trunk and spreading branches. In a moment the children were in it, looking indeed not unlike a family of squirrels as they scrambled about and peeped at Nessa through the clusters of pointed leaves.

Nessa had never been in a tree in her life, but the children seemed to look upon it as so easy and natural a place of habitation that she merrily accepted their invitation to mount.

"Will it be difficult to get up there?" she asked, indicating a place about four or five feet from the ground where the trunk spread out into three great branches.

"Oh no, no," exclaimed the children, "as easy as possible. Here, take hold of our hands, and set your foot on that sort of bump lower down, then you can walk up like going upstairs."

They stretched out their hands and in a moment Nessa was seated in the tree.

"Shamrocks and Shillelaghs! There's Mr. Plunkett out again, and he's seen you, Nessa," cried Winnie in delight, "and oh, he does look so jolly shocked!"

Nessa was enchanted with her novel position.

"Never mind Mr. Plunkett," she said gaily. "Let us read the letters now."

"What shall we be to-day?" said Winnie. "Nessa couldn't be a squirrel exactly, you know."

"We'll be Irish kings and queens," said Murtagh, "and Nessa will be a stranger who has brought us these letters from a far-away king."

"Oh yes," said Winnie. "And you'll live with us for a little while, and afterwards we'll discover you're an Irish princess who was stolen away when she was a baby. Now then, Myrrh!"

Nessa settled herself into her place with a little pleased laugh. It was much pleasanter to be out of doors this morning than in the drawing-room. Murtagh read the letters aloud. The children had read them five or six times already, but they listened with the greatest delight, laughing again at the little jokes, and telling Nessa to "just listen to this!" when any particularly nice part was coming.

"Now," said Murtagh, when the letters were quite finished, "come along with us, and we'll show you our dominions."

"Yes," said Rosie. "It's too bad; she's been here

a whole week, and we've never shown her our islands, nor nut-wood, nor the mushroom-field, nor the mountains."

"I'll tell you what, Myrrh," exclaimed Winnie, struck by a sudden inspiration, "we'll have a picnic up the mountains on your birthday. What do you think of that?"

"Yes," said Murtagh, "and oh, Win, a plan has just come into my head. Such a beauty! I'll tell you presently."

"Is it a secret?" asked Rosie.

"Yes. But I'll tell you too by-and-bye. Oh, it is so jolly; you'll go cracky when you hear it." And being unable to turn head over heels Murtagh relieved his feelings by springing to the ground.

Having once got into the tree Nessa would gladly have spent the morning there. But the children had no notion of allowing the appreciation of their roost to take that form, and for the next two or three hours she was trotted backwards and forwards from one favourite place to another, till when twelve o'clock came she was glad to go with the children to the back-door and receive at Donnie's hands a glass of milk and a slice of brown cake.

The children would not have left her then but for their anxiety to talk over Murtagh's plan. He had already in whispers confided to them the rough sketch of it, and it promised indeed to be so delightful that after disposing of their cake and milk in the yard they could restrain themselves no longer; and, leaving Nessa to enter the house alone, they merrily scampered back to the chestnut-tree to hold their consultation.

Their wonderful plan was simply this: that they were to discover Nessa to be the real princess of their tribe, and on Murtagh's birthday they were to have on the mountains the grand ceremony of crowning and receiving her into the tribe. It was the details of the plan that were so specially delightful, Murtagh said; particularly one.

"Now then, listen," he said, when they had all got back to the chestnut-tree, and he had settled himself comfortably astride a thick branch; "it's all been floating into my head the whole of this morning, and I'll tell you just how I've planned it. We'll have a regular grand—what d'ye call it? like when the Lord Lieutenant was made Knight of St. Patrick, up——"

"Ceremony," interpolated Winnie.

"Yes, ceremony, up in the ruins. We'll make a throne of stones in the middle of the court-yard, and we'll decorate it with green branches. Then we'll have garlands of evergreens and hollyhocks, and loop them up on the walls all round, and we'll have a green ribbon and a wreath of shamrocks. And I'll be sitting on the throne, and all the followers standing round. Then you four will bring her up the mountain, and as soon as she comes near, the followers will run forward and scatter shamrocks on the ground for her to walk over, and she'll be led up to the throne. Then I'll get down off the throne, and I'll say, 'Will you reign over us, our princess? and will you promise to be true to our tribe?' or something like that, and she'll say, 'Yes,' and I'll tie the green ribbon round her arm. Then comes the beautiful part of the plan! I'll make her promise to hate Mr. Plunkett, and to defend us against him."

"Oh, Murtagh!" exclaimed Rosie. "You won't be able to do that. You know she's grown up and she would never promise that."

"Yes, but you don't know how I'm going to do it," returned Murtagh triumphantly. "Just wait till you

hear. After I've put on the ribbon I'll take up the shamrock wreath, and I'll say: 'Kneel down, and promise to hate the Agents, and to defend your tribe against them.' And she won't know, you see, about Mr. Plunkett being an Agent; she'll only know about them being something very bad, and so she'll say 'Yes.'"

"Then she'll be bound to help us when we get into scrapes with him; won't she?" asked Bobbo.

"Of course she will," returned Murtagh. "She'll be as much one of the tribe as you are then."

"Oh, I say, Myrrh," cried Winnie, clapping her hands, "it's perfectly delicious. What a sell for old Plunkett!"

"What an awful lark!" said Bobbo. "It will serve him out so jolly right!"

"And look here, Myrrh," said Winnie, whose head was already full of minor details; "you must get a string for the violin with sixpence of your birthday money, and we'll teach all the children to sing some songs—'The Wearing of the Green,' and 'the Shan Van Vaugh,' and——"

"Yes," said Murtagh, "but I haven't told you yet

what we're going to do with the rest of the money. You only know half the plan. With all the rest of the money we'll buy buns and things for the followers to eat, and Donnie'll give us a lot of tea, so they'll have a kind of school-feast after the ceremony; because, you know, they'll be awfully hungry, and they will be so pleased."

Never had any one imagined a more delightful birthday plan, and the children proceeded eagerly to discuss every possible detail. The number of buns and barmbracks had to be calculated, the "followers'" appetites guessed at; their voices, their appearance, the songs to be chosen, the decorations, the order of the ceremony, —all were subjects of the warmest interest.

"Isn't papa a dear old blessing of a father, remembering about my birthday all that way off, and sending me half a sovereign?" exclaimed Murtagh, gratefully pulling his letter out of his pocket and looking at it. "I never knew any one like him in all my life, he does think about things so. I wonder if he knew what a lot of fun we should have with it!"

"Oh, and I'll tell you what we must do, Myrrh!" exclaimed Winnie, completely engrossed by the matter

in hand. "Every one of the followers must have a large green branch in his hand, like Birnam wood in the theatre. It'll make them look more. You remember about Macbeth in the theatre," she explained, seeing Rosie look puzzled.

"Oh yes, of course," replied Rosie, who didn't remember a bit. "And I'll tell you, too, we'll get a lot of apples for the feast. They'll be nearly as great a treat as cakes for the followers, because they never have any."

"Yes, yes," cried Bobbo. But Murtagh objected.

"No," he said decidedly, poking his letter into his pocket again. "We won't."

"Hullo!" remarked Bobbo. "Why not?"

"Well," said Murtagh, looking at Winnie in hopes of support, "I don't want to have anything wrong at all in this plan. It's just to be a bit of fun, and so I think we had better keep clear of old Plunkett."

"Oh, stuff!" said Rosie. "Apples are nothing. He's used to us taking them."

"Yes, but," replied Murtagh, "papa gave us the money, and the grown-up people would all say we oughtn't to take them, so I vote we leave the beastly

things alone. He's sure to make it an excuse for talking to us."

It was Murtagh's plan, and Murtagh's birthday, so he had a right to decide. But when the question of the apples was settled a thousand other questions arose, and they were far from being all decided when the second dinner-bell summoned the children to the house.

But the village children had to be made acquainted as soon as possible with the fact that their services would be required, and as the tribe that the children were so fond of talking about consisted exclusively of their five selves, they felt that there was some difficulty about calling together the honorary members upon whom they had so recently conferred the rank and title of followers.

However there was Pat O'Toole, a young friend and favourite of Murtagh's, to whom they had once confided their notion of enrolling themselves in a tribe, and there was Theresa Curran, who might fairly now be said to belong to it, and with these two to help they would easily be able to organise their festival.

A proposal from Nessa to go and visit Mrs. Daly after lunch was therefore accepted with delight, and while she sat and chatted with Mrs. Daly the children

carried off Theresa for a consultation. Pat O'Toole also was summoned, and the wonderful plan was unfolded. It was received with enthusiasm. Anything the young ladies and gentlemen wanted was sure to be found charming, and this manner of doing honour to Nessa was just after the hearts of the people, with whom she was already in highest favour.

It was all even more easy to arrange than the children had expected. Pat and Theresa charged themselves with collecting the "followers," and Murtagh gleefully gave orders that they were to assemble that very afternoon for a first singing practice on one of the little islands.

The children came dancing home, elated and happy. What a pity all days were not like this day! Everything went well, and they felt so good and bright as they raced and capered about the lawns.

Nessa went in-doors on her return from the village, but they never went in till evening, and to-day of all days it was impossible to sit still.

Alas! their little active feet were always tripping into mischief. After a time they took it into their heads to go and prepare the island for the singing

meeting. To reach it they had to cross a little bridge quite close to the garden-gate, and unfortunately, as they were racing back after having completed their preparations, they came upon Bland driving a horse and cart through the river. The horse had refused to cross the bridge, which was without a parapet; and as the children came up they found that Bland had by precaution taken out the lading of the cart before driving through the water. Large baskets of apples stood ranged side by side upon the bridge.

"Ha, ha!" cried Bland, seeing the children as he landed the cart safely and began to load it again. "We've conquered you at last, my young gentlemen. You'll have to do without apples now whether you like it or not. Every one in the garden was picked this morning by Mr. Plunkett's orders."

"I'm sure I don't care," replied Murtagh, feeling too good-humoured to be annoyed. "I don't want the beastly things."

"Sour grapes, young gentleman, sour grapes!" replied Bland, chuckling. "I daresay you were on your way to the garden now, if the truth were known."

"We weren't anything of the sort, as it happens," said Bobbo.

"We'd made up our minds just this very morning not to take any," added Rosie.

"Easy talking. Words don't cost much; but I'd have been sorry to trust you under a tree of ripe apples," returned Bland, wiping his face after the exertion of getting one of the baskets into the cart.

"Shut up your impudence," said Murtagh, "or I'll just turn one of these baskets into the river, to show you how little we care for your stupid old garden stuff."

"Oh, ay. It's not so pleasant being circumvented. I don't wonder you don't like it. But here's an end of your apple-eating for this winter. In another hour every apple that was in the garden this morning will be safe in the apple-room, and the key in Mr. Plunkett's pocket."

"Here, Myrrh," said Winnie laughing, and pushing one of the heavy baskets as she spoke, "help me to give it a shove, and we'll teach them not to crow before they're out of the bush. Hurrah, there it goes! What do you think of that, Mr. Bland?" she cried triumphantly, as with the help of a hearty push from

Bobbo and Murtagh the basket toppled over into the river, and a bushel of rosy-cheeked apples bobbed up and down in the rapid current. Then, without waiting for any answer from indignant Bland, the children all ran away laughing, leaving him to finish loading his cart, and to go to Mr. Plunkett with another complaint of their unruliness.

"What a pity I did it though, Myrrh! I'm very sorry," said Winnie, with a queer twinkle in her eyes, as they stopped on the hall-door steps. "But I forgot all about meaning not to take any more apples. It was such a jolly sell for Bland, just when he thought he'd got them so safe; and he didn't think we'd do it really."

"I'd like to see Mr. Plunkett's face when Bland tells him," said Bobbo, laughing. "Why, we took more apples that way than we'd have taken in two months just for eating! It'll teach him to try and circumvent us."

"I'm sorry all the same," returned Winnie, laughing in spite of herself. "I am really, Myrrh."

"You don't look very bad," answered Murtagh. "Still if you want to cry I'll run and get you a pocket-handkerchief."

Just then they overheard Nessa's voice through the open drawing-room door, saying: "Have you asked Master Murtagh? He might possibly know what has become of them."

"Master Murtagh! Master Murtagh's not far off, and if it's anything important I've no objection to go and ask his opinion," exclaimed Murtagh, taking a flying leap over one of the hall-chairs, and confronting Mrs. Donegan as she made her appearance through a doorway.

"'Deed, Master Murtagh," returned Donnie, "it's no matter for joking. The only two decent shirts you have in the world have gone clean out of your linen drawer. I've hunted for them high and low, and you'll have to go to church to-morrow without a rag to your back. It's too bad the way the things is spirited here and spirited there. You can't lay a thing out of your hand but it's gone before you turn round."

Murtagh and Winnie being in an excitable state of high spirits both burst out laughing, and Bobbo called out: "It wasn't your shirts she had, was it?"

"Yes," ejaculated Winnie through her laughter. "Oh, Donnie, for goodness' sake, don't look so funny;

you'll kill me with laughing. Look here," she continued, holding her sides and trying to control her mirth, "you needn't look so astonished; she wanted them a great deal worse than Murtagh, and she hadn't got any money to buy some."

"Miss Winnie, how can ye talk in such a way! Do you suppose I'd like to know that I hemmed and stitched at them shirts for you to give 'em away?" returned Mrs. Donegan indignantly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Miss, to go and leave your brother without a thing to go to church in of a Sunday morning."

"I have a splendid new flannel petticoat," laughed Winnie, "and I'll lend it to him with all the pleasure in life."

"It's time such doings were put a stop to," returned Mrs. Donegan. "Mr. Murtagh, how could ye think of doing such a thing?"

"I've been to Mr. Murtagh," returned Murtagh gravely, "and he says he can't give any opinion on the matter."

"Then you may tell him from me he ought to be ashamed of himself, an' it would be a good thing if he'd

given his opinion before now. I'm sure I have more bother than enough with him," returned Mrs. Donegan, for once quite out of temper; "and now I'll have to stand and argufy half an hour with Mr. Plunkett before I get the money for some new ones."

"Did you know where they were, Murtagh?" asked Nessa coming to the drawing-room door.

"Yes," replied Murtagh, not quite certain whether he felt inclined to laugh or to blush. And then Winnie explained how they had gone.

"Ye'd make a mighty generous churchwarden," remarked Donnie, as she walked off in high dudgeon to the kitchen.

The children troubled themselves very little about Donnie's scoldings. But Nessa told them that she did not think they ought to give away their clothes; it was not right to be troublesome. And her little exercise of elder-sisterly rights awoke sundry uncomfortable scruples in their minds connected with their late destruction of their uncle's fruit. By tacit consent, however, the untimely fate of the apples was not alluded to in Nessa's presence, and next morning the children themselves had forgotten it.

Not so Mr. Plunkett. The incident irritated him; he saw in it a fresh defiance from the children, and when next day it was followed by Mrs. Donegan's request for new flannel shirts for Murtagh he resolved that they should be made for once to feel his authority.

CHAPTER XV.

"I NEVER heard of such a shame in my life. It's my own money, and I don't care what you say. I *will* have it. It's downright cheating."

Murtagh's white face and angry flashing eyes added vehemence to his words. He was standing opposite Mr. Plunkett, his little figure drawn up to its full height, one foot slightly advanced, one hand resting on a corner of the table, his hair tossed, his clothes untidy as usual, his whole attitude breathing indignation and defiance.

The other children stood in a group behind him casting hot indignant glances at Mr. Plunkett, who seemed quite unmoved. He was standing near the fire with his hat on and an umbrella in his hand. He

was determined not to let himself be provoked into losing his temper, and now replied to Murtagh's words:

"To take new clothes for which your father had paid and give them away without his permission resembles stealing. You chose to do it when you thought it would cost you nothing, and it is perfectly just that you should bear the consequences."

"It is not right. It is not just," returned Murtagh. "Papa said I was to have that half-sovereign as a birthday present, and nobody in the world has a right to keep it from me."

"Besides," burst out Winnie, "Murtagh didn't take the shirts; I took them. I threw the apples in the river too, only you always like to fix everything on him."

"It was just the same thing," replied Mr. Plunkett. "Murtagh should not have allowed them to be taken.

"You don't seem to understand," he continued, addressing Murtagh, and speaking as though Winnie's remark had not been made, "that in this world if you take what does not belong to you you must pay for it. I am the steward of your father's money in all that concerns you, and in his interest I intend that you shall pay him back for the shirts you chose to give away.

Had your general conduct been such as to justify me in overlooking this offence I should have taken upon myself the responsibility of paying for your new shirts with his money; but it is not so, and I am in no way disposed to shield you from the just consequences of your actions."

"It's not in papa's interest, you know it isn't. Just as if he would care for two beastly shirts. You're just doing it because you like to plague us, and oppress us, and drive us into being wicked," replied Murtagh passionately.

"I tell you what, young gentleman, if you were my son for just ten minutes I would teach you not to use such impertinent language to your elders," returned Mr. Plunkett, whose temper was not enduring.

"If you don't want me to talk to you like that you shouldn't behave so. It's my own money that papa gave me to enjoy ourselves with, and I can't help talking to you in that way when you keep it from me. You have no right to."

"I thought you might have listened to reason," replied Mr. Plunkett coldly, "but since you choose to behave like an infant you shall be treated like an infant. I have the money and I shall keep it. If there is any

over when your shirts have been paid for it shall be returned to you." So saying he moved away towards the door.

"I *will* have it all," said Murtagh. "I don't care so much about the money, but you have no right to keep it when it's my own that papa gave me."

Mr. Plunkett left the room without making any answer. But Winnie's indignation now burst beyond all bounds, and dashing to the door she called after him: "He shall have every penny of it. It's his very own, and if you steal it I'll steal some of yours. So there now. You have fair warning."

Nessa happened to be coming down the passage just at that moment, and she overheard the speech.

"What is the matter?" she asked, looking round at the angry faces.

"Oh, it's too bad," said Winnie; "he's going to steal Murtagh's half-sovereign that papa gave him. It's just like him; he's always perfectly delighted to get a chance of plaguing us, and he thinks just because he's the strongest and has got the money that he'll conquer this time, but he shan't, I can tell him."

"What do you mean?" said Nessa. "Steal Murtagh's half-sovereign! I don't understand."

"He says he won't give it to him," replied Winnie, calming down a little. "He's going to keep it to pay for the shirts we gave Theresa, and it was my plan about cutting them up, and I took them out of the drawer. He has no right to take Murtagh's money to pay for what I did."

"And now we can't have the feast, nor the expedition, nor anything," said Rosie, "and we've asked all the children. What shall we do? We can't tell them not to come."

Murtagh was too angry to speak a word. He stood where Mr. Plunkett had left him, kicking the leg of the table, and looking as though at that moment he would have cut Mr. Plunkett's throat with pleasure.

Nessa looked at him regretfully; and then she asked Winnie in a tone almost as disappointed as Rosie's: "How is it that you did not know till now?"

"I don't know," said Winnie. "He never said a single word till just now he came in here, and we asked

him to give us the money to-day instead of the day after to-morrow, and he said: 'I have no money to give you.' First we thought he had forgotten, and we reminded him about the half-sovereign. Then he said: 'You spent that some time ago;' and he told us we were not to have it because of the shirts. And it isn't only that he won't give us our money," she continued, trying to keep down her rising anger, "but oh! he does do things in such a dreadfully disagreeable way. You don't know what he's like."

"I am so sorry," said Nessa, full of unlawful sympathy. "What can we do?"

"We can't do anything," replied Rosie. "We'll just have to disappoint everybody and do without our feast, and it was such a beautiful plan. You didn't know half of it."

"He has no right to Murtagh's money, and he shan't keep it," said Bobbo, marching indignantly out of the room as he spoke. The other children followed him away out of doors; and whatever she might feel for their disappointment Nessa had no further opportunity of trying to console them, for she saw no more of them all day.

No further opportunity of trying to console them with words, that is to say; but what would Mr. Plunkett have thought had he seen her a little later that afternoon?

She was thoroughly vexed at the notion of the birthday being spoilt. The children had confided to her all their joy in the prospect of feasting the followers; they had told her how they were determined to have no wrong side to this "adventure"; and they had been so happy in the anticipation of this perfect birthday that it seemed really cruel to deprive them of their innocent pleasure.

The affair with Theresa had been a mistake from beginning to end. What was the use of raking up the consequences of it? Yes; the more Nessa thought the more provoked she felt. Mr. Plunkett did not understand the children at all.

But suddenly a brilliant idea crossed her mind. She laughed aloud a merry little laugh; then jumping up she marched straightway to the kitchen. There dear old Donnie was taken into counsel, and with small regard for principles of justice they hatched between them a plot—well, a plot for which the best excuse

they could find was, that, as Nessa said, "It was such a pity not to be happy on a birthday."

"Never you fear, Miss Nessa," replied Mrs. Donegan. "It's me is housekeeper here, thank the Lord, and not Mr. Plunkett; and the children shall have a better feast than ever they'd buy with their poor little bit of money. Bless their hearts! they don't know the value of things. Whatever does he want, plaguing and worritting them for a couple o' little shirts, as if children won't be children all the world over!"

Nessa discreetly "supposed that Mr. Plunkett had his reasons"; but her eyes sparkled merrily as she added that she thought there could be no harm in giving the children a picnic to celebrate the birthday.

"'Deed and, Miss Nessa, if you want to know the truth of it, shadow a bit I care whether it's harm or no," replied old Donnie, laughing outright. "If the children have the fancy to feast all them dirty little vagabones out of the village, why they shall feast them for all the Mr. Plunketts ever lived between this and Limerick. An' it's a pleasure to me to have the crossing of him for once, so it is."

"Well, don't tell that to the children, you wicked

old thing," replied Nessa, laughing; and away she went singing along the passages without one pang of conscience for what she had done.

That evening she gleefully recounted her misdoings to her uncle, but the children gave her no opportunity of announcing to them the plan that had been arranged during their absence; they did not return to the house during the afternoon, and in the evening when Nessa went to look for them they were not in the school-room.

After she was in bed the idea occurred to her that perhaps they had not come in. It would be just like them to start away up the mountains after tea and not come home till the servants were in bed. Nothing would have surprised her in them; and she believed them quite capable of spending the night on the wet grass under the chestnut-tree if they happened to find the doors locked.

She told herself that the idea was foolish, but having once got it into her head she could not get it out again. And so, after turning and twisting two or three times upon her pillow, she decided that the best thing she could do was to go and see for herself if they were really and truly in their beds.

Slipping on her warm white dressing-gown she set off on her journey across the house; and great was her satisfaction as she softly opened the door of the little girls' bedroom to hear through the darkness a sound of regular breathing which announced that its rightful inhabitants were not only in possession but were sound asleep.

Her mind was relieved, and she thought herself very foolish for her pains as she crossed the passage and looked also into the boys' room. Two little beds gleamed white in the far corners, but the lights and shadows were so disposed that Nessa was doubtful for a moment whether they were occupied. She advanced to the side of one of them, and while she stood contemplating Master Bobbo, whom she found safely enough tucked up in the bedclothes, a low "Nessa, is that you?" came from the other corner of the room.

She turned and saw Murtagh's dark eyes fixed upon her. "Yes," she replied, moving to his side of the room. "I hope I did not wake you?"

He looked at her for a moment without raising his head from the pillow; then he said in the same low

voice: "We've got the money. Bobbo got it, and I can't go to sleep, I don't know what to do."

"How did you get it?" asked Nessa, kneeling down on the floor beside the low bed in order to speak without waking Bobbo. "What made Mr. Plunkett change his mind?"

"Mr. Plunkett didn't change his mind; Bobbo got it the way Winnie said, while Mr. Plunkett was down at supper."

"Do you mean he *stole* it?" asked Nessa in dismay.

"Yes," replied Murtagh. "At least I mean, you know, it isn't stealing really. Bobbo and Rosie say they're quite certain it couldn't be stealing because it's only our own money; papa said we were to have it, and Winnie says she thinks so too." Murtagh was evidently not quite convinced of the truth of his arguments, for he spoke in a persuasive tone of voice.

"Oh, Murtagh, I am so sorry you have done that!" said Nessa, greatly troubled. "It *is* stealing."

"It's our own money though," said Murtagh. "Papa said we were to have one half-sovereign from Mr. Plunkett, and this will be only one; only Winnie and I thought we didn't care about spending it now

any more; we thought we'd like to bury it in the island or somewhere. Then we wouldn't have submitted to him tyrannising; but nobody could say we'd regularly —— You don't think it could be *real* stealing, do you?" he asked, breaking off the other sentence, as though he shrank from saying the ugly-sounding word.

"Yes, I do," said Nessa. "But you will give it back, because, listen, Murtagh—"

"There's Winnie," said Murtagh, who was lying with his face turned to the door.

Nessa turned and saw a little barefooted white figure standing in the middle of the room. It was Winnie, who had overheard Nessa's last words.

"It can't be stealing," she said, coming up to the bedside. "I've been thinking about it ever since we went to bed, and it's our own."

"No," replied Nessa, lifting up one side of her dressing-gown for the little shivering figure to creep under. "It's not your own. You are mistaking. You are doing something that will not be honourable. Listen, I can explain it to you quite plainly. Two new shirts will cost about seven shillings and sixpence, so you gave seven and sixpence to Theresa. That is, you spent seven

keep it, so I just took it to show him he shouldn't; this way will do just as well."

Rosie was the one who disapproved most highly, for she very much disliked the prospect of giving up their delightful birthday-plan. Her anger was all directed against Mr. Plunkett. Since Nessa said it would be real stealing to keep the half-sovereign, she was willing that it should be given back. She had taken a great fancy to Nessa, and was anxious to stand well in her esteem. But as for Mr. Plunkett, no words could be bad enough for him, she thought. It was all humbug and nonsense about it being just; he didn't care a bit whether it was just or not. He was doing it to spite them and nothing else. So Rosie said to Mrs. Donegan, as the children dawdled through the kitchen after breakfast:

"And how can we manage about the feast?" she lamented. "It's so dreadful to ask people to come, and then tell them they mustn't because we haven't got any money."

"'Deed if Mr. Plunkett thinks I'm going to stand by quiet and see such a slight put on Mr. Launcelot's children he's mighty mistaken," returned Donnie, her

indignation flaming out all anew. "Never you fear, honeys, but ye shall have a feast right enough, and a better one than ever came out of a confectioner's shop, I'll warrant. If that's all ye were going to spend your money on ye shall have ye're money's worth. 'Deed, for the matter o' that, it was Miss Nessa herself came to the kitchen and settled it wid me yesterday. And as for Mr. Plunkett, I don't know where his heart is at all or if he has one, to see yez exposed like that before a parcel of ignorant gossoons that would know no better than to laugh at ye."

"Oh, Donnie!" exclaimed the children in delight, "do you mean you'll give us the things we'll want for them to eat?"

"Just settle amongst yourselves what yez want, and let me know by dinner time. I'll hurry through with my work this morning, and all ye need trouble yourselves is to bring the cart round to-morrow to the kitchen-door."

"You darling old Honey-donnie! Won't it be a sell for Mr. Plunkett?" exclaimed Bobbo, while Murtagh's face lit up joyously, and the little girls began to arrange what they would want.

"Apple-pie and custards I vote for!" exclaimed Murtagh, breaking in upon their discussion; "only let's look sharp about arranging, because Nessa has sent to ask Mr. Plunkett to come to the drawing-room."

"Ye won't let on a word to Mr. Plunkett," said Donnie, who in her secret heart was as much afraid of him as anybody. "The hen that lays the eggs is the best to hatch them."

"You needn't be afraid. We're not likely to have much conversation with him," returned Murtagh with a scornful intonation. "But did Nessa really think about that yesterday?"

"She did so," replied Donnie. "She came in there at the door, and I was whipping the cream here by the table, and 'Donnie,' says she with her sweet-looking way, 'the poor children have got into a great scrape;' and then she told me all about it, and we put our heads together. And if two women can't circumvent Mr. Plunkett," added Donnie laughing, "good Lord! he's sharper than I take him for!"

"How awfully jolly of her!" exclaimed Murtagh; "come along off to the drawing-room, and let's thank her before old Plunkett arrives."

"Oh, ay!" said Donnie, "that's it, and never a word o' thanks for me that'll have all the bother!"

But the children were already rushing off to the drawing-room, and paid not the smallest attention to her complaint.

They were in full flow of enthusiastic thanks and merry plan-making when Mr. Plunkett's step was heard crossing the hall.

"Whisht!" cried Murtagh. "Here comes the man-eater! where's his pill?" Bobbo exploded with laughter, and Murtagh desperately hunting in all his pockets had but just time to find the half-sovereign before Mr. Plunkett entered the room. Nessa feared for a moment that the children were going to turn the whole affair into a joke, but at sight of Mr. Plunkett every sign of laughter vanished from their faces.

Mr. Plunkett turned to Nessa and inquired politely what she wished to speak to him about.

"It is Murtagh who wishes to speak to you," she replied, glancing towards Murtagh to see whether he wished her to explain further. But Murtagh, without any apparent bashfulness, advanced and said with a grave dignity of manner that astonished Nessa:

"I wanted to give you back this. We took it yesterday because we thought you had no right to keep it from us; but now we have been thinking, and you are just, though you needn't have done it." As he spoke he handed the half-sovereign to Mr. Plunkett, and then, determined to say nothing more on the subject, he turned away and left the room.

"I do not understand," said Mr. Plunkett, looking at the coin lying in the palm of his hand. "I never heard of such a thing! What does the boy mean? Did he steal it?"

"No," said Bobbo, turning very red and stammering, for he never could help feeling a little frightened when he was actually in Mr. Plunkett's presence; "I took it because it was Murtagh's own, and it's a horrid shame the way you plague him!"

"Bobbo," said Nessa reproachfully, "you are not polite!"

"Polite! Miss Blair," said Mr. Plunkett, "neither he nor his brother ever are polite. But this," he continued, looking down again at the half-sovereign, "this is more than I expected even from them! I did think they would have hesitated before taking money that

does not belong to them. Since it is not so, why I shall for the future be careful to lock up my purse. They are certainly charming young gentlemen!"

The scornful accentuation of the last word flushed the children's cheeks with anger, but for once they controlled themselves, and without speaking went out to rejoin Murtagh.

"Do not be too hard on them," pleaded Nessa, turning to Mr. Plunkett as the door closed behind them. "They thought they had a right to take it. You see how they give it back to you now."

"I do not pretend to be acquainted with their thoughts, Miss Blair, but in my eyes nothing can excuse a downright theft," replied Mr. Plunkett, and he bowed and left the room.

"Ah!" sighed Murtagh on the terrace as the children joining him repeated Mr. Plunkett's every word and gesture. "It is too bad the way every plan we have gets spoilt; I did think this one was going to be all right!"

"Well, you know there's one thing," said Winnie, "it has been all right really. About the shirts was our

last plan; and we gave back the money when we thought that part wasn't right."

"Yes; but it's all the same, the way things get mixed up. You do one little thing, and then that makes you have to do a lot more. First we took Theresa, that made us want the money; then wanting the money made us give Theresa the shirts to make her happy. Then giving her the shirts made old Plunkett take our money, and that made us take his, and that made us all in a rage, and I don't care about the ceremony or anything now."

"Never mind, Myrrh," exclaimed Winnie. "It's no good making ourselves miserable now. Put it out of your head. That's what I do. I always keep some awfully jolly thing in my mind for thinking about, and then when I have any troubles I think of it instead. My thing now is what the followers will look like when they see the feast spread out. Can't you imagine? —their eyes will get so big, and their faces will get red all over."

"Oh, yes," said Murtagh, "and we must lay it out on the other side of the courtyard wall, so that they mayn't see it at first, because they will be so surprised."

And then forgetting their anger the children talked merrily on, till twelve o'clock ringing out from the stables reminded them that they were hungry.

With the half-crown that remained from Murtagh's money they bought that afternoon the green ribbon which they considered indispensable to the proper celebration of the ceremony; and having employed every spare minute of the day in making evergreen wreaths, they had a last grand singing practice on the island, and went to bed early so as to make the morrow come quicker.

END OF VOL. I.